



‘Whatever it may cost me,
I want a better country for my children’

Sites of Memory about the Crimes of the Junta in Argentina



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In June 2019, Nenad Vukosavljević and I received an extraordinary opportunity to visit Argentina. The invitation was for the conference ‘The Presence of the Past, Urgencies of the Present: The Authoritarian and Totalitarian Past and the Challenges of Contemporary Democracies’, to be held in Buenos Aires.¹ Since we had the opportunity to visit Argentina, we decided to extend our stay for a few days, primarily in order to visit sites of memory. This text details our experiences, because they were immensely valuable to us and we thought it important to leave some trace of them in writing.

We were fortunate that our friends Maria Eleonora Cristina and Mariana Tello Weiss could spend some time with us, and were honoured to have them as our guides at various sites. We had met already back in 2013 when the four of us had the unforgettable opportunity to participate in the Mandela Dialogues. The multi-stage programme lasted for almost a year and brought us close together. Daniel Rafecas, a judge from Buenos Aires, was also a participant. Our cooperation continued when the three of them participated at a conference that we organised in Sarajevo.² At that time, we had no idea that we would be visiting them in return.

Maria and Mariana are activists of HIJOS³ (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Oblivion and Silence), an association of the children of people who were kidnapped and disappeared in Argentina. For several years, Maria has been running the *Archivo Provincial De La Memoria* organisation in Córdoba. Mariana is a teacher, researcher and curator at the *La Perla* Museum, a former prison camp, but her primary dedication is to supporting survivors and witnesses. As I was completing this text, she was appointed director of the Argentine National Archives (*Archivo Nacional de la Memoria*). Daniel is one of very few, and also the youngest federal judge who has worked on cases of crimes against humanity systematically committed during the last dictatorship and has prosecuted numerous high-ranking officials. He is currently running for the office of National Public Prosecutor. What I mean

1 Reports about the conference were given by the organisers (*Centro Internacional para la Promoción de los Derechos Humanos* (CIPDH-UNESCO) from Buenos Aires and the *Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur* from Berlin), and we included a brief reflection in the [CNA 2019 Annual Report](#).

2 ‘Memory, Justice and Reconciliation!? International Dialogue’, June 2015.

3 *Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio*. *Hijos* (pronounced ‘ee-hos’) means children, sons in Spanish.



to say with all this is that we could hardly have wished for more relevant resource persons to discuss memory and human rights.

We visited:

- *La Perla* – Site of memory and human rights promotion in Córdoba
- the Provincial Memory Archives in Córdoba
- the ESMA memory site in Buenos Aires
- the Memorial Park dedicated to victims of state terrorism in Buenos Aires
- the *Plaza de Mayo* in Buenos Aires.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Maria Eleonora Cristina, Mariana Tello Weiss and Daniel Rafecas for their time, patience and everything they showed us and told us about. We have learned a lot. Also, a big thank you to Anna Kaminsky and the Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED Diktatur. Anna selflessly works to promote international exchanges and bring together people working on memory to exchange experiences and work through professional dilemmas.

These four people probably have no idea how much inspiration and support they provided for us to persevere. A heartfelt thank you.



On the disappeared in Argentina or the ‘Dirty War’

In 1976, a military junta led by General Jorge Rafael Videla carried out a coup in Argentina.⁴ It was a time when people started disappearing in large numbers. The disappearances had started a few years earlier, in fact, but intensified incomparably following the coup.

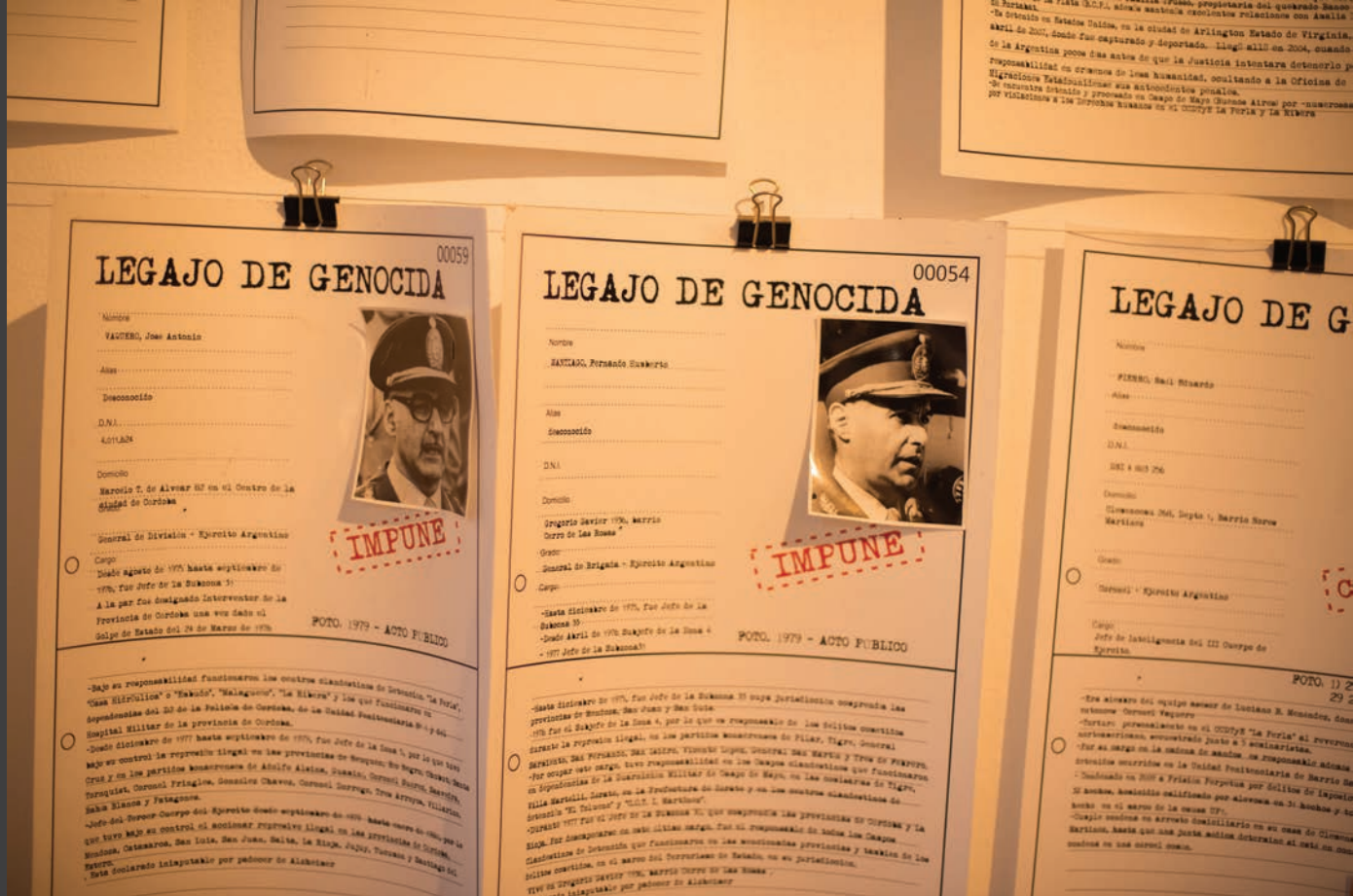
During the junta, some 30,000 people were disappeared and became known as the *desaparecidos*. People were kidnapped from their homes and in public places and all trace of them was lost. The primary targets were students, union leaders, reporters, leftist activists and sympathisers, as well as members of guerrilla groups. Some claim that anyone could become a target. The remains of less than a third of the disappeared have been found and identified, while the fate of most remains unknown.

This ‘state terrorism’, as Argentinians refer to it, was largely unknown to people at the time; it was not talked about, there were no reports in the media. The people were not disappeared in secret or far from the eyes of the public; the kidnappings would take place in broad daylight, but the explanation was that these were terrorists and guerrilla fighters with whom the state was engaged in a ‘Dirty War’.

The junta remained in power until 1983, when it was deposed by a democratically elected government under the leadership of Raul Alfonsin. Due to public pressure, trials against members of the junta began in 1985. However, fearing a new military coup, the democratic authorities decided to only prosecute high-ranking officials, those most responsible for the wrongdoings. Thus, Videla was sentenced to life in prison. He served five years, at which point the new president of Argentina Carlos Menem amnestied him along with his colleagues and fellow army officers responsible for crimes against humanity, kidnappings, torture, murder, robbery and removal of children.

It was only in 2006 that trials for crimes against humanity were reinstated, once the amnesty laws were declared unconstitutional. Videla was put on trial again in 2010. Two years later, he was sentenced to life in prison again. He died in prison in 2013.

⁴ The coup deposed Isabel Peron, who had become president in 1974 following the death of her husband Juan Peron. Juan Peron is another great name in Argentinian history, a general, but also a populist, who had come to power and led the country on three occasions, his party had been banned and he had spent 18 years in exile. He became president for the third time in 1973, when he returned to Argentina from exile.

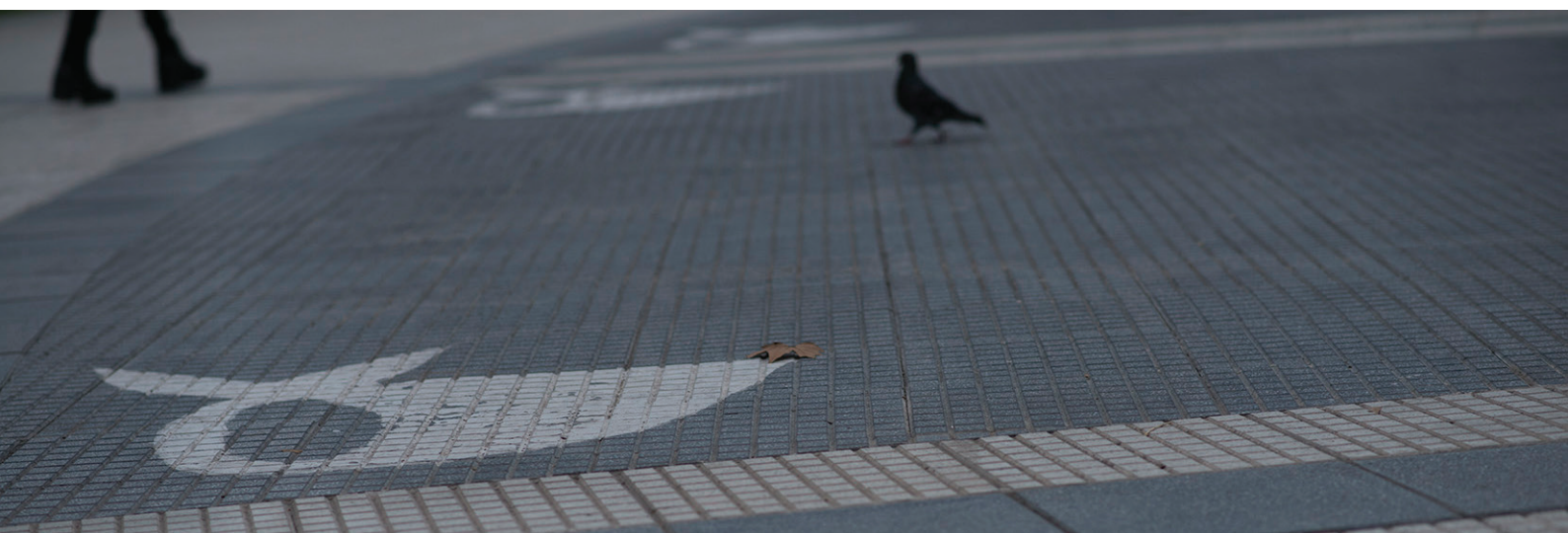


Plaza de Mayo Site of Memory

Plaza de Mayo, or May Square, is the central square in Buenos Aires that has seen numerous social events and protests. It is surrounded by buildings of important institutions: Government House *La Casa Rosada*, the City Assembly, the Ministry of Finance and the National Bank, and is connected by the *Avenida de Mayo* with the square in front of the Argentinian Congress.

The brave Mothers of May Square (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo*) have been gathering there since 1977, looking for their disappeared children and demanding answers from the state, though every public gathering had been banned. They wore white kerchiefs on their heads with the names of their children embroidered on them; more than a mark of recognition, these kerchiefs symbolised the diaper cloths they would wrap their children in when they were babies. Sometimes, they would carry photographs of their missing children.

The Mothers were the first larger group to publicly stand up to the dictatorship. They began as individuals going to institutions to find their children, before organising into a group and later into a movement. They would gather each Thursday at Plaza de Mayo. In addition to putting pressure on the authorities and appealing to the domestic public, they also tried to engage international attention for





Argentina by sharing their stories of the disappeared. Their activities were not without consequences. Publicly, the authorities called them crazy, secretly, a number of Mothers were 'disappeared'. Azucena Villaflor, one of the founders, was abducted, tortured at the ESMA camp and killed in one of the 'death flights' (more about this *invention* later on in the text). However, this did not prevent the other mothers from continuing to gather and look for their children, most of them had nothing left to lose.

Today, the Plaza de Mayo is decorated with symbols of the Mothers: white kerchiefs.

La Perla Site of Memory

<https://www.facebook.com/espacio.laperla/>

La Perla is a former military encampment that was transformed shortly after the 1976 coup into a clandestine camp where abducted citizens were detained and tortured. It was the second largest detention camp in Argentina, situated in the Córdoba Province, not far from the city of Córdoba. It is estimated that during the two years of operation of the camp, some 2,200 to 2,500 people had been brought there, with only a few rare survivors. In 1978, the camp was transformed into a military barracks.

The prisoners at *La Perla* did not know where they were. They were brought in blindfolded, with sacks on their heads, or at night-time. As soon as they arrived to the camp, they were subjected to torture and given a number for identification in place of their names, a symbol of their dehumanisation. Communication was strictly prohibited, and they were particularly forbidden from revealing their identity. After the initial torture, the prisoners were placed in a large shack where they slept on straw. Although a large number of people were held in this single room, but they were isolated because they were forbidden to communicate, they were blindfolded or hooded and their hands were tied. The survivors have said that the psychological torture was the worst.



La Perla was not just a place where people were detained and cruelly tortured. Executions were carried out in the surrounding fields. The guards would call out the numbers assigned to people who would then be shot. There are testimonies of heaps of piled up corpses that were loaded onto lorries and taken away somewhere.

The camp also had special rooms for brutal physical torture that was carefully administered in doses to make sure the prisoners did not succumb, because the aim was to extract information from them. Most of the prisoner could hear the screams from these rooms 'for intensive care' as the members of the junta and the guards called them.

The purpose of the site had remained unknown for several years. It was known that detention camps existed but not where they were located precisely. The truth about *La Perla* was brought to light with the help of architect Gustavo Contepomi, one of its rare survivors. While he was detained there, he was unable to get a full picture of where he was, because he spent most of his time blindfolded. After he was released, he drew scenes from the camp from memory, including the arrangement of rooms and his fellow blindfolded prisoners. His drawings helped locate the site and then the forensic experts stepped in. His drawings were collected in a book that is now displayed at the very entrance to *La Perla*, Site of Memory and Promotion of Human Rights (*Espacio para la Memoria y la Promoción de los Derechos Humanos*).





Our friend Mariana Tello Weiss guides us through the museum where she is the curator. The junta also marked her life. Her mother Margarita Suzana Weiss was killed in a police raid in 1976. She was 25 years old. Her father managed to escape and spent the next nine years in hiding. One of the policemen kidnapped little Mariana, who was only nine months old at the time. Fortunately, her mother's father, Mariana's grandfather soon heard about the kidnapping and went in search of Mariana. He managed to get her back three months later. Mariana grew up with her grandmother and grandfather. She only met her father many years later. Unfortunately, many children who were kidnapped or born in a camp were never found.

La Perla is surrounded by beautiful landscapes, fields with low vegetation, a few trees and the hills in the background. At first glance, it seems like an ideal vacation spot. However, as soon as we entered the first shack with the large room where the prisoners were kept and where they slept, our blood ran cold from an ominous chill in the air, even though the space itself was not frightening. The most distressing were the traces left in this space by family members of the victims. For some of the disappeared, it was at one point determined that they had been held prisoner at *La Perla*, for some the very spot they occupied in the common room, blindfolded and with their hands tied, was determined. At these places, families left their photographs, a flower here and there, inscribed their names or messages on the wall, such as: *'Te amo papa, Viviana'*⁵.

In one of the rooms of the museum, photographs of victims are exhibited on walls and boards. Next to most of the photographs there is space where you can write, leave a message. This was a response to the need of visitors and families of victims to write something down next to the photographs of the victims. Mostly, there are inscriptions of last goodbyes, hearts are drawn, promises that the victim will be remembered, a flower is placed here and there, freshly picked or crocheted, red. We asked Mariana who was our tireless guide through the museum whether some visitors had abused the space left for inscriptions. She told us that this was very rare and that the most extreme case she could remember was when they found 'Communist whore!' written next to one of the photographs. They thought about what they should do about it and ultimately decided to leave it there. Other visitors wrote replies to the slur in opposition to such treatment of victims.

5 'I love you, dad. Viviana'







One section of the museum is dedicated to survivors and their memories of being imprisoned in the camp. Mariana told us about how important it was to set up this section in order to re-humanise the survivors, who were mostly harshly stigmatised. She said that it is not just a matter of survivor's guilt, but distrust from the community: how is it that they survived, did they collaborate with the executioners, what did they reveal and who did they betray in order to survive. Mariana also pointed out that the torture was extreme, that it would have been impossible for an ordinary person to bear without revealing everything they knew. On the other hand, it is precisely thanks to the survivors that they were able to learn how the camp functioned, and where it was located. We go back to the story of Gustavo Contepomi, the architect whose sketches of the camp helped locate the site, and are now displayed at the entrance to the museum. Mariana tells us how it has been found based on the Holocaust that those skilled at drawing had higher chances of survival.

Only one section of the museum presents the criminals, those accused and found guilty, and displays their photographs. But this is only a small part of the museum. For the most part, it is a place memorialising the victims. In the spine-chilling atmosphere of the former camp, they have managed to humanise victims in a dignified and warm way and to express grief over the loss of life.

One of the sections of the museum is devoted to the time when the crimes took place, so that younger visitors can get a sense of what was popular in those days, what was the pop culture in which the victims grew up, what kind of music they listened to, what books they read, who were their idols, what did the political posters look like, as opposed to concert posters. For us, it was also a reminder that while some people were kidnapped and tortured, elsewhere life went on quite normally.

The former garage of the camp now houses art installations about human rights that celebrate life and refer to different former and contemporary human rights violations. They are a reminder that the struggle does not end with the prosecution of a group of criminals, but that it goes on and that we need to remember and remain vigilant, especially about institutions.

As we were leaving, we ran into a group of school pupils who had come for an organised visit. After a feeling of hopelessness, our hearts were filled with hope again. We enjoyed the view outside that seemed as if from another planet, and still could not connect the beauty of the surrounding nature with the atrocities that took place here.



Archivo Provincial De La Memoria – Provincial Memory Archives

<http://www.apm.gov.ar/>

In the very centre of Córdoba, near San Martín Square, there is a labyrinthine structure made up of interconnected buildings. This was once the headquarters of the security services, used since 1974 as a clandestine detention centre for the kidnapped, where they were tortured and killed. For all intents and purposes, it was a prison camp. Today, the buildings house the Provincial Memory Archives (*Archivo Provincial De La Memoria*).

Displayed on the street in front of the Archives are many black and white photographs of people. Some resemble photographs from ID documents, while others are snapshots of everyday life. Beneath each photograph is a name and date or year when the person was disappeared. A few photographs have additional information: occupation, or university programme in the case of students. Some photographs are of couples, their names and the dates when each was kidnapped are written underneath. In some places, there is a quote, such as: ‘Whatever it may cost me, I want a better country for my children.’⁶ The photographs are impossible to miss, they hang on ropes above the heads of passers-by and lightly sway in the wind. Our friend María Eleonora Cristina who guides us through the Archives, explains that the photographs are of the disappeared remembered in Córdoba. Some of them were once residents of Córdoba, some had perhaps never come to this city, but their family members or close friends who remember them are here. The Archives’ activists have put in a lot of effort to collect these photographs from the victims’ families.

Initially, the Archives were a civic initiative by an organisation of citizens who tried to preserve documents and evidence of the dictatorship and traces of the disappeared, and to collect additional documents that had been neglected in various places. In the mid 2000s, their project grew into a provincial institution and was given this police building to use. This place is a memory site also.

⁶ In the original: ‘*No importa que me cuesta la vida, yo quiero un país mejor para mis hijos*’.



The building has many rooms, mostly those that were used as a reception camp, and even a few small cells where the prisoners were kept. There is even a small courtyard in the middle that functioned as the prison's courtyard.

It seems hard to reconcile that this building had housed a 'clandestine' centre where people were brutally tortured, because it is located in the very centre of the city. The building next door is a clergy house, and the one next to it is a cathedral. Someone had to have heard the screams. The prison courtyard could even be seen from the windows of the clergy house. It was simply impossible that the place was a secret for the priests who lived there. But years after the camp was no longer used, groups of people had to work on shedding light and proving where the crimes had taken place.

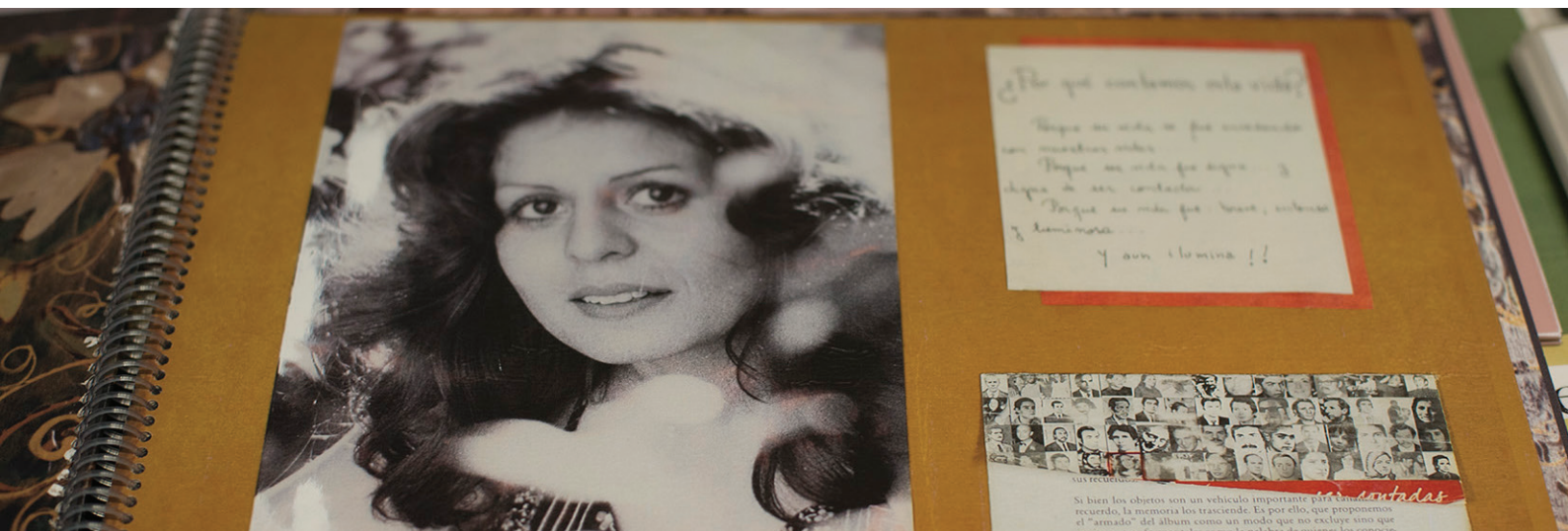
The room where photographs are displayed left a particular impression on me. The high ceiling and whitewashed walls covered with different coloured frames of different sizes and proportions and variously arranged on the walls, but still exceptionally harmonious, and with every frame holding a single photograph. No names or dates, or any kind of text, explanation or context. These are mainly portraits of the disappeared, but there are also a few family photos with children, or photos from a festivity or a vacation, one man is playing the guitar, a couple hold hands, a woman flashes a brilliant smile, another holds a teddy bear, one man hugs a dog. There is a photo of Mariana's mother, someone affixed a crocheted red flower to the frame. In one frame, there is a photograph of Maria's family, her father and mother and baby Maria in her mother's arms. Maria was two years old when her father disappeared. His name was Roberto Luis Cristina and he was 37 years old. His remains were never found.

It is difficult to look at the photographs, and not just because I have become attached to these people due to my relationship with Mariana and Maria. In our region, I have visited many memorial rooms and they would usually made me feel anguished. There was no anguish this time, just sorrow. I realised that this was the first time I saw photographs of victims that were not uniform, militaristic, where the victims were not 'just numbers'. There were no ideological, national or religious symbols. This memorial room was done with love and full respect towards the victims and it provided space for the personalities of these people, it displayed scenes from their private lives. It was actually full of life, though it testified to disappeared lives. It was very dignified: to devote space to portraying victims' lives, instead of using them for grand ideas, national or otherwise. There was no collectivisation.



Several frames had flowers attached to them, some fresh, a few already completely dried. Maria said that the flowers are left by families or friends when they came to visit. She told us about the mother of one of the victims who comes each year and brings a cake so that she can celebrate what would have been her son's birthday with the people from the Archives. I think about this, how these places of memory in our region are mostly not places for the families and friends of the victims, they don't belong to them, because they have been placed in the service of higher causes.

Displayed in the next room are some of the personal belongings of the victims that the families had given the Archives: a guitar, a public transport card, a record player and some records, The Little Prince book, a motorcycle, a necklace, a button... We are drawn to a heap of photo albums or scrapbooks. I'd never seen anything like it. These scrapbooks were made by victims' family members or friends and brought to the Archives to be displayed there. And again, the first thing that strikes you about this is the personality, the space allowed to people to be different, individual, without being co-opted into a higher purpose. This respect towards people, their personalities and diversity. The scrapbooks are all differently designed, with different dimensions, different contents, differently decorated. Each scrapbook is devoted to a single person. Most contain photographs from that person's life: family photos, childhood photos, school class photos, photos with dear ones or pets, photos from university, from festivities, sports events, summer vacations. Sometimes documents belonging to the person







are included: from school, from university, certificates, tickets. There are often poems. There are also drawings, flap jackets of books the person loved, newspaper clippings, clipping from letters or journals, last goodbyes. One of the scrapbooks contains only a goodbye letter decorated with flowers and hearts.

We leaf through them, overcome with emotions. We like this approach of having public space contain memories of the victims from the perspective of their loved ones. They are not treated as wheels in the grand mechanism of politics or ideology, but as living people that we lost. Maria explains that everything began with one of their invitations to families to contribute a personal item of the victim to the Archives. One woman brought a scrapbook that she had made herself and decorated with embroidery. They liked the idea very much and invited the other families to make books of memories about the loved one they lost, offering to help in designing them. Copies of the scrapbooks are displayed, because some were so beautiful, there was concern that they might vanish.

In a smaller room, there is a book of memories about Argentinian men and women who ended up in exile. There is a world map on the wall with lamps lit up in countries where people fled.

During its reign, the junta kidnapped or abducted some 500 children. These children were with their parents at the moment when the junta abducted the parents, or they were born in the camps and clandestine prisons. Pregnant women were kept alive in clandestine prisons and camps, and killed after they gave birth. The children were then handed or sold off to what were considered suitable families. The mothers of these children were mostly killed, often the fathers too, so it was the grandmothers and grandfathers that started looking for them. Modelled after the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the organisation of mothers looking for their children, a group of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo (*Las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*) looking for their grandchildren was formed. Technological developments and advances in forensic genetics have made it possible to link grandparents and grandchildren with the help of DNA analysis. Thanks to this possibility, 130 people have so far been identified and linked with their biological grandmothers and grandfathers. They were already adults when they found out about their origins. One room of the Archives is dedicated to kidnapped and abducted children, the so-called 'living disappeared'. In it are photographs of identified children next to photographs of their disappeared parents.

Strings of lights hang above the courtyard of the Archives, the former prison courtyard. There are



130 of them, one for each identified life. Whenever another disappeared child is found, another light is lit. 'Fireflies' – they call them.

Another unique and interesting part of the Archives is devoted to books that were banned during the dictatorship. Many of the banned books are on display. We immediately saw that they were very diverse. The banned books included works by Borges, Llosa, Neruda, Ernesto Sabato, Hemingway, Freud, Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Hegel, Sartre, Foucault, etc. *The Little Prince* was banned, along with many other children's books and picture books. There was also a book about tango on the list. There is a table displaying copies of documents giving the reasons why the books were banned. For example, the *Latin American Bible* was deemed 'leftist and subversive'. Llosa's novel *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* was banned for 'perverted content', repeated 'insults of the family, religion, the armed forces and moral principles'. The children's book *La torre de cubos* by Laura Devetach was banned for 'unrestrained fantasy'. For the junta, books, like knowledge, were subversive. In the first few years of the dictatorship, they managed to reduce the number of printed books from 50 million a year to 17 million.

Maria says they often use this room for workshops, public and cultural events, and especially for visits by children.

The Archives hold a vast wealth of information, and it takes at least a few hours to look through the exhibits. I have included here only the details that left a particular impression on us.



ESMA Site of Memory

www.argentina.gob.ar/derechoshumanos/museo-sitio-de-memoria-esma

During the dictatorship, ESMA was the largest and probably the most notorious camp in Argentina. It was clandestine, of course. Its name comes from a space of some 17 hectares that used to belong to the Argentinian navy and was where the military mechanical academy was located, the so-called ESMA. It is situated on one of the main roads to the centre of Buenos Aires. Today, this site is called the Site of Memory and Human Rights (*Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos*). Numerous large buildings that used to belong to the navy are still there, but they are now used by various institutions and non-governmental organisations. The building of the former clandestine camp is a museum today: the ESMA Memory Site Museum. In it, you can see a detailed overview of the machinery that subjected people to violence.

From 1976 to 1983, some 5000 people came through this camp. Most ended up being drugged and thrown, still alive, into the sea in Argentina's notorious so-called 'death flights'. The kidnapping, torture, enslavement and abduction of children born at the camp were perpetrated by special unit 3.3.2 under the command of the Navy Security Service.

The camp had different rooms for various purposes. The place where the prisoners were kept is called '*Capucha*' or 'Hood', because the people there had sacks over their heads. The place called '*Pecera*' or 'Fishbowl' was where forced labour was organised. The basement was equipped for torturing prisoners, but the torture was also administered in other places, such as the 'Small Hood' where some of the prisoners were also kept. One room was used for storage of belongings stolen from the prisoners when they were kidnapped. In the courtyard, there is a place from where prisoners were transferred to the 'death flights'.

There were three separate rooms where pregnant women were kept and taken care of until they gave birth. They received somewhat different treatment because they were given a bit of milk or fruit



and were not made to wear sacks over their head while in their room. They would be executed after they had given birth.

The place from where prisoners were taken to the 'death flights' is called the 'Transfer'. This was the term used by the military for killing people. These 'transfers' were mostly conducted each Wednesday. The prisoners would first be taken to the basement and injected with a sedative. Then they would be taken to waiting helicopters. They would be thrown alive from the helicopter into the Rio de la Plata river or the Atlantic Ocean.

Before it was transformed into a camp, this building used to house the officers' club and was set apart from the other buildings of the military school. Systematic torture was conducted here, but some of the rooms continued to be used by officers as usual. There were dorms, offices of the heads of the special unit, and even the admiral's house where he stayed and sometimes even brought members of his family. Through the window of the house, they could see how armed guards would escort people with sacks over their heads.

The Museum is a chilling place. It is also a necessary memory site that lays bare the functioning of the entire machinery of violence that had been 'clandestine' and allegedly unknown. It admits persons over 12, but children aged 12 to 15 must be accompanied by an adult.

We arrived in front of the Museum before it opened, and as we waited, we were surrounded by younger schoolchildren who had come there with their teacher. The investment of devoting time and introducing younger generations to the machinery of state violence is actually an investment in preventing such 'state terrorism' from being repeated.

Additionally, to our relief, the Museum had an audio guide in English.



Memorial Park dedicated to victims of state terrorism in Buenos Aires

www.parquedelamemoria.org.ar

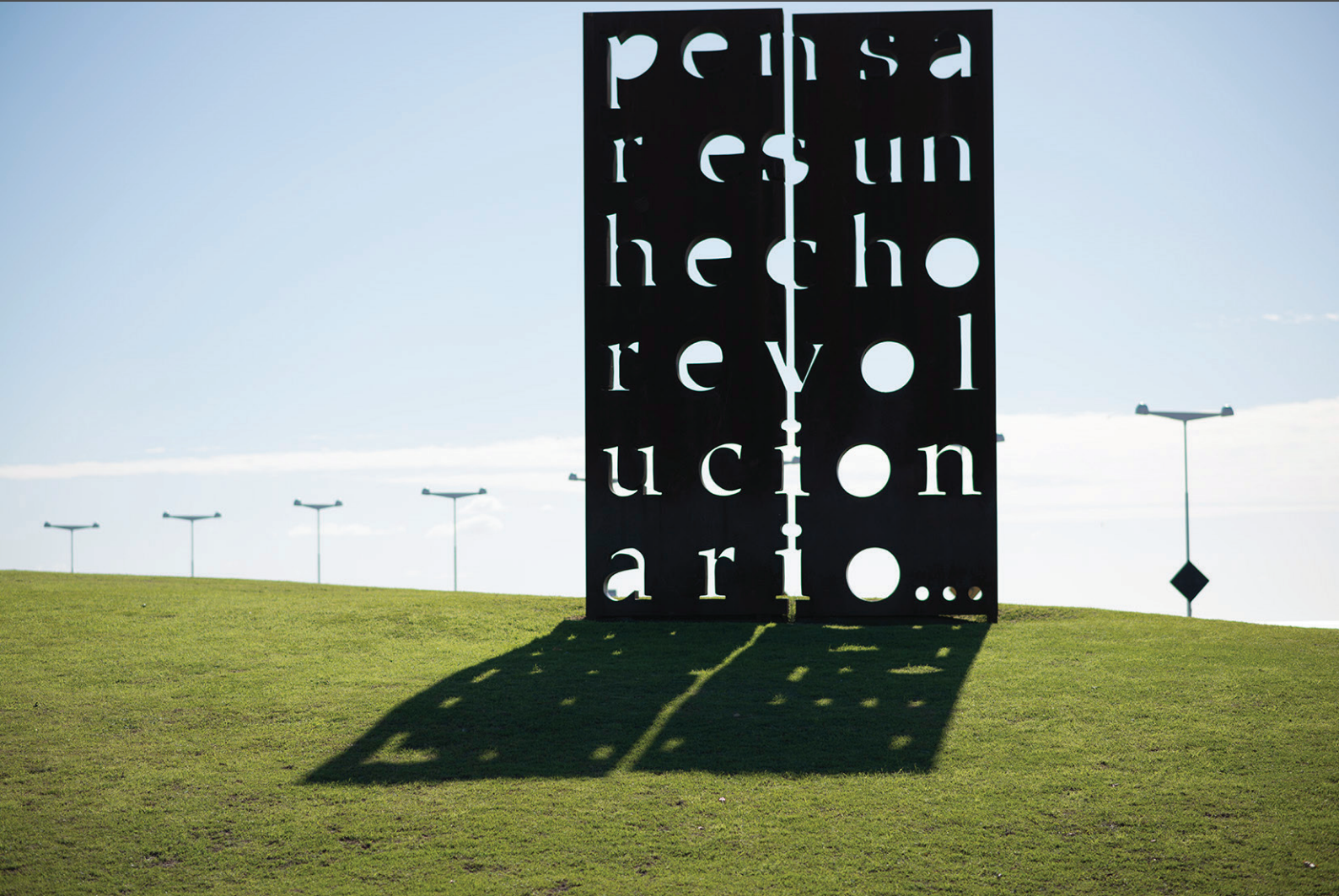
The Memorial Park for victims of state terrorism is located on the bank of the Rio de La Plata river in Buenos Aires. It was built in 1998 by human rights organisation, the University and the city authorities. It extends over an area of 5 to 6 hectares and includes a monument to the victims, a series of sculptures and an exhibition space for socially engaged art.

The monument to the victims of state terrorism is made up of long walls with stone tablets bearing the names of the victims of the state repression that lasted from 1969 to 1983. It includes the victims from the time of the rule of the military junta, as well as a host of other events that preceded the military coup, starting from the rebellions in Córdoba, Rosario and Corrientes. The walls of the monument contain 30,000 stone tablets, which is the estimated number of victims, but names are inscribed on only 9,000 of them. Officially, only 9,000 victims have their names. However, the design of the monument allows for adding names and there are hopes that retrials will result in further identifications of victims.

Mariana shows us where her mother's name is inscribed, Maria shows us her father's name. On the stone tablets, the age of the victim is inscribed next to their name. The victims were mostly very young people. The sight is sad beyond words.

It was interesting to see a series of different sculptures in the memorial park designed by various artists. Some of the sculptures were truly impressive. For example, *'Pensar es un hecho revolucionario'* – an upright steel plate with the letters carved out to show the sky through the message of 'To think is a revolutionary act.' This work also indirectly refers to censorship of freedom of thought and books, something the junta practised unsparingly.

There is a poignant sculpture of a boy peering out of the Rio de La Plata river, which is sometimes seen in its entirety and sometimes mostly submerged, depending on the river's water level. The boy is Pablo Miguez who was disappeared when he was only 14. There is also a sculpture in the park that





depicts the silhouettes of three human bodies through which you can see the sky and which was made to commemorate the children of the Argentinian writer Matilda Herrera who were kidnapped and are considered missing persons.

Along the path by the bank there is an installation made up of 53 signs that look like traffic signs from the distance. These signs warn and inform, not only about the dangers that lie ahead, but also about those from the past. They use the language of symbols to educate about state violence, the dictatorship in Argentina and related events, institutions and sides, such as the role of the media, the role of the United States, the economic crises, etc. The messages from some of the signs are quite clear, they are simple and use straightforward symbols (for example, a sign telling us that a person becomes a target or a sign for no turning left). Some signs are more difficult to understand without better familiarity with Argentinian history. One of the signs refers to the pregnant women in the clandestine camps and their abducted children. The sign for no dictatorship calls for justice and punishment of the perpetrators. One sign reminds us that in 1978, in the midst of the dictatorship and disappearing of people, the Football World Cup was held in Argentina. On a picture of a TV set it says 'Place given over to state terrorism'. Videla and the junta actually used the World Cup to polish their international image and spread propaganda about the stability and success of Argentina, while just a few kilometres from the stadium and the world's cameras, people were being tortured and thrown, still alive, into the river.





The creators of the signs are the activist group *Grupo de Arte Callejero*, who also used similar signs around the city as reminders of the junta crimes and to demand justice.

The memorial park, just like the other sites of memory we visited, has no national, ideological or religious symbols. Even there, we happened upon a school visit.

Impressions, Thoughts

Before we left Argentina, we managed to catch a few moments with judge Daniel Rafecas. He stoically bore a deluge of our questions about Argentinian society, the trials, the upcoming elections. It was the first time we asked him why he decided to be judge; what was it that made him decide in 2004, while he was still very young, to apply to be a judge in cases against members of the junta, given how dangerous that job is. He told us that as opposed to his early days, today he is unafraid. He had a situation where an accused, a former high-ranking member of the junta, told him to think carefully about what he was doing and whether he needed this, a young man, his life ahead of him, 'and our time will come again.' It was a thinly veiled threat. When I asked how this man dared issue such a threat while being the accused, and why he was so convinced that the junta would be in power again, Daniel explained that their history was such: dictatorship following dictatorship, one coup after another, round and round.

It seems that vicious circle has finally been broken.

Our visit to Argentina left its marks. It is difficult to hear of the fates of people in dangerous times, no matter how accustomed we have become to horrifying stories. But it was wonderful to have the opportunity to visit this country and its sites of memory. Working on peacebuilding in the context of the former Yugoslavia, we would often become despondent about the culture of memory practised here with respect to the wars of the 1990s. We knew that things had to and could be different, but we had no concrete solutions (just some indirect clues). For that reason, visiting Córdoba, and even Buenos Aires was like a salve. We did not see anyone's suffering glorified for a higher cause, sites of



memory dedicated to victims have no national, ideological or religious symbols about belonging to some majority group, they are not in the service of constructing identities. Instead, what we saw was endless respect and love for the victims, and grief over their lost lives. Most of these sites celebrate life. With nothing zealous about them. It can be different. We will not forget.

One of the commendable practices is the planting of memorial trees to commemorate those disappeared during the dictatorship. Thus, in the courtyard of the Archives in Córdoba, there is a beautiful memorial tree that is decorated with colourful crocheted flowers on special occasions. It was touching to see the orange trees planted along the streets of Córdoba to commemorate those who are no longer here.

At our sites of memory, there is nothing to celebrate life. Just a vast, destructive despair that feeds a desire for vengeance. Of course, the post-Yugoslav and Argentinian contexts are very different, incomparable. But perhaps this difference in modes of memorialisation is not so much about the socio-political context and more recent history, but is essentially a generational difference. Most of the sites of memory in Argentina were created by the children of the victims, a new generation full of life, while in our case, sites of memory were created by parents for their killed children. And sometimes, it was not even the parents but systems that used the victims to glorify some idea (starting from the sublime virtue of 'giving your life for your country').

It is also commendable in Argentina that so much effort is put into informing young people about the crimes of the dictatorship and the importance of human rights. We ran into groups of young people or children at almost every site we visited. At the Archives in Córdoba, we attended one of the diverse workshops on human rights that are regularly held. In the courtyard filled with young people sitting on mats, some drinking their *mate*⁷, a trans lady Marlene Wayar held an impressive workshop about diversity, discrimination and human rights. I asked Maria how they get schools to bring pupils for visits and was surprised at her answer: they no longer have to keep inviting them, the human rights workshops are now part of the curriculum.

With our histories being what they are, all we can do is keep reminding and warning people. It seems that in Argentina, they are doing just that.

7 An herbal drink similar to tea, traditional in a number of South American countries.

