

ARGENTINA

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↓ Jonathan Karszenbaum (Guest)

Welcome to the fourth episode of histoPOD. HistoPOD is one part of histoCONLINE, which is the first digital edition of the event series histoCON, organized by the German Federal Agency for civic education. HistoCONLINE aims to commemorate the end of World War II from multiple and international perspectives. My name is Annika Brockschmidt. Today we will discover how Argentina remembers the Holocaust, we will focus on the country's own ties to the history of the Holocaust and how its remembrance has changed over the generations. Our expert today will also tell us why the memory of the Holocaust was and is so important for Argentinian society then and today.

My name is Jonathan Karszenbaum and I am a political scientist. I have been the executive director of the Holocaust Museum in Buenos Aires since March 2016. And between 2009 and 2015, I was the executive director of two associations of Holocaust survivors' "Generations of the Shoah" and "Sherit Hapleita", which both in 2018 were incorporated into the museum.

Let's start in the present. What is the situation in Argentina today? What does the public remembrance of the Holocaust look like today?

The Holocaust has a growing importance in the collective memory of Argentina. There are governmental remembrance events, memorials in the city of Buenos Aires and in other cities. Argentina is a founding member of the IHRA and the only Latin American member of the IHRA. So, there is a commitment. One of the reasons that the remembrance of the Holocaust in this country is so public is that the Jewish community is the largest in Latin America. And we also have the International Day of Remembrance on the 27th of January. And there is a governmental event in Yom Hashoah in April or May, depends on the year. DAIA, the central community entity and the museum, we carry out remembrance events. And in Argentina, we also have April 19th declared the day of coexistence in cultural diversity and as a remembrance of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. And also, in the schools there are activities around the Anne Frank birthday that. I have to say that in Argentina there are 200.000 Jews more or less in a country of about 45 million people.

I asked Jonathan to tell us more about the history of the Holocaust survivors who came to Argentina.

We are the largest community and we received about four or five thousand Holocaust survivors during the war and after the war. So, we have a growing commitment of the Holocaust survivors and their sons and the grandsons. Now that made that possible that now the federal state and the provinces and the cities had been working an important role to remember the Holocaust.

Today young Jewish Argentinians are very involved in the remembrance of the Holocaust. Jonathan goes into detail about some projects that his museum offers to strengthen the bond between the young and the remaining Holocaust survivors.

I have to say that in the Jewish community the young generations are very involved in the Holocaust remembrance. There are projects, they made for them in the last 10 to 15 years and even they lead projects by themselves. For example, there is a project

IHRA:
International
Holocaust
Remembrance
Alliance

DAIA:
Delegación de
Asociaciones
Israelitas
Argentinas

called “Remember Us” here in Argentina led by young people. We in the museum have the apprentice project that is designed for the future. We make a young person meet a Holocaust survivor, they have a bonding, they have meetings and after some process in those meetings that young person commits to tell the story of his survivor, of his teacher. And also, they have to tell in the future about the bond. That’s the importance of the project.

It looks a bit different when we look to the non-Jewish community. However, Jonathan remains optimistic.

I have to say that in the non-Jewish world here in Argentina, in the non-Jewish, regular Argentinians the young people are interested growingly in the Holocaust, but it’s a slower process. But I have to say in the last three decades, we have more interested persons in the subject, more teachers learning how to teach Holocaust, more policies and laws attempting to say that the Holocaust is important here in Argentina.

Part of Argentinian history is the story of Jewish immigrants and refugees before, during and after the war.

During the whole process of the Nazi regime Argentina received more or less 40,000 Jewish people coming from 1933 to the end of the 40s. A part of them, a 10 % were Holocaust survivors. But during the war, Argentina was neutral. And some refugees managed to come to the country during the war. And after the war, it was harder to enter the country because we had migratory direction in the new government. We had some antisemitic policies.

These immigration restrictions affected Jonathan’s own family.

They had to enter the country through Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Brazil. For example, my grandparents came through Uruguay after the war. It was from 1945 to 1949, that those immigrants were regularized. They were allowed to enter after 1949 without a problem.

Argentina was neutral in World War II. Because probably very few of you, myself included, are experts for Argentinian history, Jonathan has been kind enough to give us some insight into the history of the already existing Jewish community in Argentina during World War II.

The neutrality of Argentina has some issues. For example, we made a new museum last December. We couldn’t open for more than three weeks but in that Museum, we show that the events related with Argentina and the Holocaust were a few. The most important one was, and I think we will talk about it, the Eichmann case. But during the war, Argentina tried something to help about a thousand Jewish children to come to the country. But it didn’t happen because of bureaucratic problems. There were campaigns of the Jewish community here to send some money and some help to the Jewish communities in the ghettos in Poland. After the war the Jewish community helped those Jewish refugees to enter the country in a regular way.

But Argentina also received another group of immigrants, Germans, a group which had its own internal tensions.

Argentina also received Nazis, pro-Nazis and anti-Nazis Germans, from Germany. From 1933 here, there was a German newspaper the “Argentinisches Tageblatt” that was anti-Nazi and the school, the Pestalozzi school that was founded by anti-Nazi Germans and also by Jewish Germans.

However, there were also those Germans in Argentina who approved of the Nazi regime.

There were also a lot of German schools that were in line with the Nazi regime. We have here an important stadium, the Luna Park, there were at least three Nazi events in that stadium. One of them was more than 20,000 people. With the Nazi flags, it was really shocking to see the pictures about that event, they were celebrating the Anschluss.

The so-called Anschluss refers to the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany on the 12th of March 1938 when German troops marched into Austria. There was resistance against this blatant show of support for the Nazis.

There was manifestation against that event in an important park in Argentina, that was reprimanded by the police. That was led by the university students here in Buenos Aires. So, we have a mix. And we try to show that good part and that not good part from our country during the Nazi regime.

For the Holocaust survivors who arrived in Argentina, like in many other countries, a tough process started. There were tensions between those in the Jewish community who had already been living there and the survivors. Questions were asked.

There were some tensions in the families, you know, you receive your nephew, and you ask him for your brother, what happened and why you survived, and he didn't. And so, that happens in the families and that happens in the community of preferences. There were some not regular institutions called the "Fareins". The "Fareins" were the community of origins. For example, the Jews that came from Warsaw, the Jews from Lodz, the Jews from Katowice. In the "Fareins" there were those Jews that came before the war and the Holocaust survivors. They were not always open to hear those stories. They didn't want to hear about that. And also, it was hard for the Holocaust survivors to explain the circumstances they lived in in the camps.

But Holocaust survivors found a way to deal with and voice their traumatic experiences. If no one wanted to or was ready to listen, they would write their stories down.

*Yizkor books:
Yizkor books memorial
books commemorating
a Jewish community
destroyed during the
Holocaust.*

They wrote about that. The Yizkor books were fundamental and Argentina had an important role about those books. And there was an important collection led by Mark Turkow here about the living and their destructions of the Polish Jewry "Dos poylishe yidntum", 155 books made this collection. And they tried to write about it, but they wrote in Yiddish. And suddenly in the 1950s they stopped talking about it. They started their own families, they started to live their life, they started working. So, there was this silence process and health process, they never shut up. They never shut up these stories, only there was no public to hear them, to listen to them. We have those memories and that conflict here in the families. Diana Wang, I worked with her, she studied this process. And it's interesting to see the decades that took the survivors to talk but also to the rest of the Jewish community and the rest of the world to hear them.

The Eichmann trial in 1961 was an important event in the worldwide recognition of the horrors of the Holocaust. But for the awareness of the wider Argentinian Society of the Holocaust, a popular movie proved to be more effective, Schindler's List.

The Eichmann case was an open door in Israel. But I have to say that in the Jewish community that happened slowly in the 70s and with the Sherit Hapleita but in in Argentina those voices were heard only after the Schindler's List and the Shoah foundation taking testimonies all around the world. In the Jewish community, the Holocaust survivors will listen, but in Argentina, in the media, in the television, that started after the Schindler's List and Shoah foundation project.

I asked Jonathan about the school classes that come to his museum today. Is the visit to the museum mandatory in the school curriculum or does it depend on each individual teacher?

80 % of the groups of the schools were led by the teacher. It's not the schools that starts or books the visit. So, it depends a lot of the tutors, we work a lot, we make a training for the teachers, there are other places in Argentina, other institutions that work with the-, how to teach Holocaust. But it is not now systematic in the educational system. It depends on the province, it depends on the school, it depends on the Ministry of Education of that province. And I have to say it's growing and we are witnesses of that. In the Jewish community there are-, we work like, for at least 30 years of including the Holocaust as a subject. But outside the Jewish community or outside the Jewish schools it will take longer.

Unfortunately, not all is rosy today.

We have many problems on the banalization of the Holocaust. Because some politician or some leader or some deputy says something about, "you're like Hitler" or "you're like

Goebbels” we have some problems. But it’s about the effect of a good issue that the Holocaust is seeing here in Argentina like the worst that can happen.

Especially when the country has tried to come to terms with its own violent past, remembrance of the Holocaust has had them to do exactly that.

The Holocaust helps the memory of the dictatorship crimes.

On the 24th of March, 1976, a coup d'etat took place in Argentina. A right-wing group overthrew Isabel Peron as president of Argentina and replaced her with a military junta, under the leadership of General Videla. During the ensuing so called Dirty War, approximately 30,000 Argentinians who went opposition to the dictatorship, were killed or disappeared never to be seen again. Some historians have analyzed the killings and have noted genocidal characteristics in their targeting and execution.

From 76 to 83, there was violation of human rights, a systematic persecution and torture and assassination of-, we don’t know the exact number, of 30,000 Argentinians in the memory of the Human Rights organizations that came after the dictator and the democracy. They sing some songs that were like, as it happens to the Nazis, it will happen to the criminals here in Argentina. In Spanish is “como a los nazis les va a pasar, a donde vayan les iremos a buscar”. Where you go, we will go to hunt you, you know. And it helped a lot. And I have to say that in non, in the non-Jewish sense of the memory of the Holocaust here in Argentina, I have to say those memories are involved and one helped the other.

During the dirty war thousands of prisoners were detained in concentration camps in Argentina.

When the Holocaust survivors started to talk in television, it was the same time that the survivors of the camps here in Argentina also started to talk. Later but it happened. I have to say that Holocaust here in a public sense is far the worst that can happen. And it has bad uses, as I said, the banalization uses, but it also has an importance and there is no week here that passed without a Holocaust or World War II information in the newspapers. For example, this new president.

President Alberto Fernández who was elected in 2019.

On one of the first trips he went to Israel, to the international commemoration of the Holocaust. And it was an issue in the media. Despite the division of the politicians here in Argentina, there is a lot of problems with the political leaders. I have to say that and that was said by the president of the museum, Marcelo Mindlin, at the inauguration. Here the memory of the Holocaust is state policy, all the governments since the democracy was re-installed here in Argentina, all the governments no matter which party they came from they made us another step in essence of the Holocaust remembrance.

Many Germans who don't know much about Argentinian history will only know of the country's history regarding the Holocaust in relation to the Eichmann trial and maybe Mengele. It is a common perception here that Argentina harbored many German war criminals after the end of World War II.

I think that perception as you perfectly said it was built around the Eichmann case. It's true that Eichmann and Mengele and Dinko Šakić and, Erich Priebke some criminals came to our country. But in numbers and in importance of that criminals, it's not different that other countries in Europe or even in America. So Franz Stangl went to Brazil and Brazil is not known, not that famous in the subject. So, the Eichmann case put in Argentina some perception that it was refuge for criminals. They came, they came. That happened. And some of them were extradited and some of them died here in peace, or Mengele managed to escape to Brazil and died in Brazil. So, that happened.

But Jonathan also stresses the importance of the Eichmann trial in Argentinian history.

We have some part in our museum where we talk about the Eichmann case. Because as I said before, this is the main event that relates our country to the Holocaust. The importance of the memory of the Holocaust is erased by some of that memory as Argentina as a refuge of criminals and Argentina is now leading the educational process

of memory in this continent or in Latin America. Argentina, it's a model of teaching the Holocaust. Because we have like 30 or 40 years of production of memory and projects for at least the last 30 years, were growing institutions dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust and programs and training programs. And Argentina as a founding member of the IHRA says something different about that issue. But yes, it happens and **we tell these stories, we don't hide them. But it's not the only thing about Argentina. And Argentina was also the country after Palestine and after United States that received more Jewish during the Nazi regime. And that's, that story we also have to tell.**

Although there have been antisemitic incidents in recent Argentinian history, Jonathan says that generally the relationship between the Jewish and non-Jewish community is very good. However, 2020 brought some changes in the margins of society. The reason for new versions of old antisemitic conspiracy tales popping up again, was the covid-19 pandemic. And while these are not generally popular opinions in Argentina Jonathan asks for vigilance.

Now in the pandemic there were also some episodes and some groups that accused the Jews to be involved with the pandemic, with the virus and the vaccine. There were some conspiracy groups that made some statements about that, they are in the margins of the society. They are not here now. But we know that the Nazi regime started as a marginal group, started as a very small group in some bar. And we have to not underestimate any sign of antisemitism.

Thank you for listening. You will hear from us again soon. In the meantime, you can find more information about the histoPOD as well as various other offers on www.histocon.de. To stay updated feel free to check the website on a regular basis as the histoCON-19 plans to successively expand the offers throughout the year. If you have further questions, please reach out to the team via histocon2020@bbb.de. The music we used is sincerely by Kevin MacLeod. Take care and stay healthy. Until next time.