



variant versions of a story to find the phrasing best suited to an English translation. She includes several stories translated directly from Yiddish originals, but in most cases translates from the Hebrew of Baron's later writings. Although Seidman is the principal translator, she always credits her co-editor Chana Kronfeld as a secondary translator, perhaps indicating a more active and involved role than is normal for an editor. For whatever reason, this particular working relationship appears to be fruitful in producing translations that are breathtaking. They read not only as if they were originally written in English, but better than most English writing: they read like what they are, literary stories of a very high calibre.

It should be noted that *The First Day and Other Stories* is published as a companion volume to Seidman's translation of an odd Israeli book, Amia Lieblich's *Conversations with Dvora*, a kind of biography of Baron written in the form of fictional conversations with the bedridden Baron late in her life. (Lieblich never actually met Baron.) Although this book is useful in many ways, it uses Baron's stories as exact representations of incidents in her life or incidents she witnessed in her home shtetl of Uzda, Belarus. The most interesting parts of Lieblich's book are in fact the summaries of Baron's short stories, which she represents as Baron's autobiographical musings. This conflation of Baron's life in Eastern Europe with her later fiction about that life is not entirely pleasing; women artists deserve to be respected as creative beings who use the full range of imaginative sources for their work and who interpret life through their characters, rather than being treated as transcribers of events. A better source for information about Baron is Seidman's non-fiction work, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish*. ♦

See Faith Jones' joint review of *A Marriage Made in Heaven and Conversations with Dvora* in the Oct. 15-Nov. 30 1998 issue of *Outlook*. — Eds.

Memories of Argentina

A SINGLE, NUMBERLESS DEATH

By Nora Strejilevich. Translated by Cristina de la Torre. University of Virginia Press, 2002.



Reviewed by Lyn Center

Even if you know nothing about Argentina's brutal military dictatorship of 1976 to 1983, *A Single, Numberless Death* by Nora Strejilevich will leave a profound impression on you. It is an emotional but coherent interlacing of personal memoirs, interviews, poetry, press reports and excerpts from official documents. These elements woven together create a portrait of the methodical kidnapping, interrogation, rape and torture by the military and the effects on the victims and their families.

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At first, the junta that overthrew the government of Juan Perón's third wife, Isabel, targeted opponents such as labour leaders and union members, university activists and journalists—in fact, anyone considered "subversive". Later the net widened to include, in their words, "their collaborators, then their sympathizers ... then those who remain indifferent, and finally we will kill the timid."¹ It is estimated that approximately 30,000 people disappeared. Another two million went into exile. Groups such as pregnant women and Jews were subjected to especially sadistic treatment. While the Jewish population comprises about 250,000 out of 34 million (.735 per cent), it accounted for about 12 per cent of the disappeared.²

Of her background, Strejilevich says, "My grandparents ... are Russians and Poles who arrive in Argentina in 1910, a year of hyperbole—peace, union and integration. It is the centennial of Argentine independence from Spain, a year bloated with commemorative acts and patriotic anthems. The faith in the country's predestination to greatness is unshakable, the racial melting pot, a fact." But by 1977, the country had changed: "There is no place to hide. There are no rooms for young activists to rent. It's everyone for himself." Nora was a university student, packing for a trip to Israel, when she was arrested. She found out later that her two cousins were killed by the military. Her brother went underground, then disappeared. The atmosphere was one of fear; people were watched, followed, forced to carry and produce documents.

There was certainly guerrilla activity in the 1960's and 70's, and inflation was running at six hundred per cent, but the book's main

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¹ Jonathan C. Brown, *A Brief History of Argentina*. University of Texas at Austin, 2003, p. 243.

² Antisemitism seems to be endemic to Argentine security forces. In 1994, the building housing the Jewish Mutual Aid Society (AMIA) was bombed, resulting in the loss of 86 lives. According to Strejilevich, "State security forces have been accused of actively participating in the attack."

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focus is not on the events leading up to the military coup, but the "Dirty War" and how it affected Nora personally. She sums up the support for the military in a few sentences: "Bankers, entrepreneurs, doctors, certain students, a few housewives, a lot of bureaucrats, all fed up with the fact that in this country the rules of the game are not being followed. Let's have the military keep us on a short leash for a while.... Let them wipe out the enemies, deal with their tantrums with a firm hand. The Army will take power on behalf of the people in order to finish off the subversives."

Nora Strejilevich describes how she was dragged out of her apartment in broad daylight and taken to the so-called Athletic Club, a clandestine prison. The reason, she concludes, was that the doorman of the apartment she had rented with her former partner, Roberto, reported to the authorities that a printing press was left behind when they moved out. Roberto had used the press to publish a journal called *Review of Philosophy*, which he wrote and edited.

In prison, she was subjected to the standard treatment: she was chained, blindfolded, subjected to electric shocks and raped. Instead of being addressed by their names, all prisoners were numbered: "There was a lock on your cell door, a lock on your ankles, and another one outside to guard you. And you were

called out by your lock number. I'm never going to forget that." Nora was forced to remember her number—K48. To survive, memory became a crucial tool; she stored away images of peace and beauty "so that I can reach for them whenever necessary. Today I project them onto my closed eyelids to snuggle against the cold."

Memory is, in fact, an important theme of the book. Nora remembers her family, her friends and lovers, the history of Jewish immigration to South America; the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo remember their children and grandchildren, determined to keep alive the memory of the disappeared. Nora writes, "It's horrible not to know what happened to a person, especially one so dearly loved. That's the worst thing, far worse than death. In death there is at least certainty. All we have is an ever-present doubt that allows no respite and no peace."

Evasion, denial, lack of witnesses, lack of proof, lack of evidence—these were the authorities' responses to the families' search for information. Even after the return to democracy, the problem remains. Nora reports that "according to a new decree passed in the early nineties by the party then in office, former political prisoners can claim a certain amount of money for each day spent behind bars. That's fine for the ones who were given due process. But those of us in legal limbo, neither officially incarcerated nor held by legitimately recognized military forces, logically don't appear on any records. We, therefore, do not exist, and our existence is pre-