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Before and After

Nora Strejilevich

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BEFORE AND AFTER

Nora Strejilevich

This autobiographical essay is an exercise in memory, in which I seek to determine whether I can define myself as a “Jewish writer.” “Before and After” names the gap created by state terror in Argentina during the 1970s. At that time, kidnapped by the military, I experienced for the first time what it means to be hated and despised for being a Jew.

It took me so long to consider myself a writer that I wonder how long it will take me to add the adjective Jewish to this particular noun. Since I was twenty-five, I have lived in countries where my mother tongue, Spanish, was rarely spoken. Documenting feelings and thoughts, writing prose and poetry became an exercise in intimacy in a world where language, culture and everyday life were foreign to me. Still, that did not make me a writer; it took another decade for that word to sound convincing to me. Until then I had been, mostly, the daughter of Sarita and León, the sister of my disappeared brother Gerardo, and a student, teacher and traveler by way of trains, airplanes and books. My authorship, for years, belonged in a collection of notebooks (a chaotic and portable handwritten library composed of short narratives, notes and poems), but I had never written a novel. I used to wonder when I would start writing, until one day I realized I had been doing it all along.

I was, nonetheless, timid about this newfound awareness. The respectable noun did not seem to agree with my non-systematic habit of jotting down anti-nostalgic memories. I thought being a *real* writer involved daily efforts at a desk, whereas I wrote in transit and whenever I had a break, or when I felt desperate. Sometimes a line made me laugh as I jotted it down. “Oh, it’s the first time I’ve heard that joke,” I used to say out loud to myself, as my fingers were choosing the best quip. Over time I ended up publishing several books, and I learned that what made me laugh made others cry. Nonetheless, if I had readers disagree with me, perhaps it meant that I was a writer. Yes, I *am* a writer. But now I have been invited to add an adjective to this statement: *Jewish*, a very special term that can also be used as a noun: *Jew*. I am again in trouble. I am sure that this noun applies to me, not only because both my parents were Jews but because, in this world, you cannot just forget that you belong to such a “tribe”; somebody will always remind you. Moreover, this word,

even if I was not quite aware of it in my younger days, has changed my life. Does that make me a Jewish writer?

In these pages I will attempt to ponder this adjective/noun, drawing on personal memories related to the J-word, an archeological practice that will help me unravel what I am searching for. I have coined two titles to guide me in this task, because they demarcate two stages in my life: “Before” and “After.” In these pages I will visit them several times, since I see my personal storyline in at least two halves. Forced disappearance is the wall that divides them.

After: July 1977–1978—From Letters to Print

I am in Israel, writing letters to my parents, and I try to convey the effect of my sudden exile, to grasp how state terror has broken us apart. They are also suffering its effects, so they understand. All the same, I must address it softly, for I do not want my words to exacerbate their pain. I find poetic ways to relate what has happened, and as I describe my new world, they travel along with me. We all know the real story: My brother is missing, and it is not safe to mention it because *they*—the dictatorship’s henchmen—might open my letters. If we refer to Gerardo at all, we call him “the Physics Book,” because he was studying physics at the time of his abduction. Sara and León are still waiting for his release, but, after my own experience of being taken to a clandestine center for disappearance, torture and extermination (the official name for these sites nowadays in Argentina), I do not have much hope for him. All I know is that, in the span of a week, our world has collapsed. I am abroad, and my brother, two years older, is nowhere to be found. I need to report his disappearance, and I do it here and there, but I feel that nobody cares enough even to listen. My parents are desperately sending letters to any international organization they can think of, from the UN to the OAS, and receiving the same replies: *We are sorry, but ... we’ll do our best, but...* They get involved with grassroots organizations such as Relatives of the Disappeared, and Sarita also approaches a group of mothers. Her closest friend is Sara Rus, who survived Auschwitz, and whose son was kidnapped as well.

I must, at least, find words to relate what took place on July 16, 1977, since the overwhelming speed and turmoil of those traumatic events has not allowed me to assimilate their effects and affects. I soon realize the nature of the problem: These occurrences are almost impossible to describe, for they shatter all frames of reference. How can one name what happens when world and language collapse? Academics call these moments “unspeakable”: Language cannot utter catastrophe, for catastrophe exceeds the ability of the mind to grasp it. I understand the logic, but I need to create my own vocabulary. Even if these events resist belief and representation, I find ways of addressing them by twisting vowels and consonants to ease my pain. Besides, I do not want to allow the vocabulary to shrink; I would rather help it expand. Since I cannot discuss these topics in my long-distance conversation with Sarita and León, I end up telling the story to myself. I write and cross

out word after word until I find the jewel, the precise sound, as if I were touching truth. Drop by drop these paragraphs turn to print, and they are so dear, so sacred to me that I never ever want them to change. In “About Survivals” and in *A Single, Numberless Death*, I wrote:

A certain perverse magic turns the key and three pairs of feet start their dislocated tap dance on an arm, a hip, an ankle, a foot, a hand. My body. I'm today's trophy, a hide with a hollow head and glass eyes. They step on me, step on a crack break your mother's back. The toy hunters have voices: “You, Jewish shit, we'll make soap out of you.” [...] Business as usual. But it's not every day (or is it every day?) that the laws of gravity are over. It's not every day that you open the door to let in a tornado that ransacks four rooms and quarters the past and rips off the hands of the clock [...] It's not every day that you try to escape and the lock has moved the door is unhinged the window is stuck and you're cornered by minutes that don't tick, the seconds that could save you are missing. [...] You are here in this body, [...] a boot on your spine, a gun at the nape of your neck. “Stand up!” And you do, submissive, confused, stupefied, defeated, and you want to scream “They've got me they've got me” while steel fingers claw your flesh you don't want to believe it can be so blatant two o'clock in the afternoon and they're stuffing you into the elevator and fondling you and dragging you along the sidewalk and finally you know that you're kicking against a nameless fate in a mass grave.

I scream my name at the top of my lungs, the street is a high diving board into the void, I don't want to jump but they make me. I land on the floor of a car [...]. “Take that for screaming in Jewish, slut. Take that for kicking us.” Take that and that and that.¹

As soon as my kidnappers spat out the internationally renowned expression “we'll make soap out of you,” my hopes for survival evaporated. Luckily, I was wrong: They were just teaching me that, as a member of the World of Outcasts, I was first-quality merchandise. Thus *they* would decide what to do with me; but only gods have the power to let life go on or take it away. As far as I am concerned, the only god *they* could be associated with is Saturn, who was depicted by Goya eating his own children. *They* were devouring us after having classified most of the young people in Argentina as “subversive”: the worst possible enemy, the cancer to be surgically removed in order to save the social body.

Political involvement and the struggle for social justice—then called revolution, nowadays emancipation—were considered major crimes by this self-proclaimed “government.” My engagement in rebellion was limited to demonstrations and discussions at the university, whereas many others, such as my brother, his girlfriend and my cousins, were involved in concrete political groups. These subtleties, though, were not crucial in times of “cleansing.” Any of us could disappear, but we did not know it. If you favored struggle for change and you were an activist, you expected, in previous dictatorships (and we had quite a few), to be tortured or even killed, but

not to be treated as an anonymous body to be disposed of. The practice of dumping drugged prisoners from planes into the River Plate so as to make human beings disappear was a novelty.²

That Jewish victims suffered specific types of vilification was not a novelty, but it was exacerbated. Jacobo Timerman, a well-known journalist who was kidnapped and interrogated about the “Andinia Plan”—an alleged Jewish conspiracy to take over Patagonia—once told me that local fascism must be understood in this way: “Whenever there is a dictatorship in our country, the Jewish issue takes center stage.” This statement has been contested by critics who argue that the military used any tool available for indiscriminate discrimination. From this point of view, underscoring the antisemitic ideology of the military depoliticizes a persecution that was directed against political rebellion. However, I believe that the vilification of the Jews was political. In Argentina, Diaspora Jews are often seen as an international danger, as foreign elements not committed to national values, people with “double loyalties” and, usually, “reds.” In this particular case, Argentina’s dictatorship espoused “Western and Christian”—not Judeo-Christian—civilization. The antisemitic leaning of the military has been documented, and I will not dwell upon it here; but, while being interrogated in the clandestine center where I was held about guerrilla training in Israel, I was informed: “We are gathering information. First we will finish off the Montoneros,³ then the Jews.” Those who were both were not redeemable.

I do not want to assign degrees of cruelty within a cruel system, but we must be aware of the distinctions *they* established in relation to their captives. It was mostly women who suffered a particular type of abuse, which our law acknowledged in 2010, in determining that “sexual terrorism” (sexual abuse, forced abortions, sexual slavery, forced nudity, etc.) was a crime against humanity. The systematic application of this “treatment” was pivotal to its redefinition in legal terms. To be victimized by the same brutal system does not mean that the experience is homogeneous.

Even if all the victims in this period suffered the worst treatment imaginable, Jews underwent unique forms of debasement. A political prisoner could be tortured in many ways, but a Jew was also made to bark like a dog or tattooed with a swastika. According to Delia Barrera, a survivor of the “Athletic Club”:

Any time, guards would come and kick us, ask our religion and, if anybody acknowledged that they were Jewish, they were automatically taken out of the “lion’s cage”⁴ and kicked or tortured. In the camp there was a guard whose nickname was the Great Führer. Hearing recordings of Hitler’s speeches all night long was the usual thing. When we were tortured, we were made to scream “Heil Hitler.”⁵

These were not just “performative acts”; antisemitism was ingrained in the military’s view of the world. Witnesses of these events are not necessarily Jewish, but I wonder if I would insist on this issue in my writings had I not felt it in my own flesh.

Still, does that make me a Jewish writer?

Nora Strejlevich

Before: 1950s–1970s—The New World is Home

In the 1960s I heard that a group called Tacuara used to go after Jews at school and beat them badly. However, I never experienced such attacks or any other form of discrimination. Both my parents' families came from eastern Europe, but in Buenos Aires that was nothing new. Many immigrants had arrived from the Old Continent. During most of my elementary school days we lived in Greater Buenos Aires, on the outskirts of the city, in a middle-class neighborhood called Olivos. It was quite remote from downtown, and everybody seemed to come from elsewhere, even from Nazi Germany. According to Mother, our neighbor across the street was a former SS officer, and I took her word for it because of how he screamed at his dog. What I learned only recently is that Adolf Eichmann, who had escaped from Europe after Germany's defeat, lived just ten blocks from our house. A German Jew who had survived Dachau found out that the famous war criminal had been living and working among us for years. In 1954 he started reporting this to Jewish organizations, and he kept it up for some time. Finally, what we all know happened: Eichmann was kidnapped and taken to Israel for trial. I realize now how blind we were to our surroundings; as these things go, we just lived our small lives obliviously. My family was part of a huge wave of newcomers from all over who wanted the New World to become their home.

Mother, who was born in Poland and moved to Argentina before she could speak, used to sing *tango* at home. My brother and I were taught *criollo* dances and played gaucho *zambas* on the guitar. My parents spoke Yiddish when they did not want us to understand. In short, we were a typical Jewish family seeking to assimilate in a country that favored homogeneity. How were we to know that this meant trouble? Nazism had started in a country where most Jews regarded their "condition" as something of the past and saw themselves, first and foremost, as German citizens. Surprisingly enough, that is where the extermination project emerged. Perhaps Mother and Father were too far away from that world to be concerned, or perhaps they did not want to share their concern with us. Moreover, León, in spite of the Shoah, did not believe that the creation of Israel was a good idea. Once you have a State, he would say, you end up repeating the inevitable vices: injustice against others, struggles for borders, and so on and so forth. He preferred to nurture the rich cultural life of the Diaspora Jews. Even when I would play with old, odd photos of women and men dressed in long shirts and weird hats (the ochre remnants of my clan, since turned into ashes), tragedy seemed remote. Perhaps my parents felt there was an ocean protecting us from it, but, unfortunately, that script was inaccurate.

True, in South America, the enemy in the seventies was whoever wanted to change society. But, again, Jews involved in this project were not only dangerous; they were the same disease that, after so many efforts, civilization had not been able to remove. When Gerardo's girlfriend, Graciela Barroca, was taken from her home, *they* asked her father: "Why did you let her go out with a Jew?" He was tongue-tied, since he, a retired Marine, hadn't allowed her to do any such a thing.

Gerardo's friend Manuel Rojas, who was kidnapped with him and survived, also told me: "They asked me how come I got mixed up with a Jew."

After: 1977—Expulsion and Writing

On July 25, 1977, I am looking down from a plane window and writing: "Argentina is just an outline, a blur below the clouds, a dreamscape."⁶ I am flying to the Promised Land, which, for me and many others, means a safe passage to life. Why I survived, I do not know. Whatever the story line, I could have been disposed of, as were many others who happened to be present when *they* ransacked a home. In my case, I was only expelled by state terror—we do not call it a "Dirty War" because that expression was part of their slang. By means of people's forced disappearance, *they* wanted to erase a portion of our society, and, at least partly, they succeeded. Our military was inspired by the 1941 Nazi directive calling upon the authorities to make political prisoners "vanish into the night and fog." I use quotation marks to distance myself from this language, one of the faces of horror. What the "Process of National Reorganization" was unable to foresee was that such an erasure could not be carried out. Contrary to the final assurance of death, the very absence of bodies created a live, ongoing presence of resistance. My revolt, once in exile, consisted of finding a way to tell our story that would overwrite the sinister slang of our victimizers.

In this sense, again: Could I be called a Jewish writer? Any writer can create a Jewish character, but often it is Jewish writers who bear witness to the cultural style or the particular conflicts that this condition entangles. However, I feel at a loss when I attempt to define myself through that particular lens. I would end up feeding the notion that only Jews are entitled to reckon with their own "problems," the same way Blacks are supposed to deal with theirs. Shall we go on accepting these partitions? Only recently has the larger community understood its role in the struggle to dismantle the brutality called racism and felt the need to intervene. A segment of society has finally grasped that hierarchy based on discrimination, privilege and xenophobia is not just the victim's problem but, rather, that of society, of humankind. Quite a few writers have attempted to disclose the pervasiveness of hate schemes, but only collective action can put an end to them.

Literature cannot save the world, and yet, what would the world be like without it? My dictionary defines "save" as: "to rescue from danger, to avoid or overcome an obstacle or a setback." It also means "to spare a person or an object from a peril or a threat, to solve a serious problem or a difficult situation." Images and concerts, poems and narratives cannot rid us of danger; they can barely set it out, disclose it or retrace it. In dark times, artworks and books end in fire, and those burnings precede people being turned to ashes. Art often becomes a victim, because it is a way of living that has wings. Wings of affect? Of emotion? Whatever they are made of, power punishes those who keep flapping them, maybe because through art new worlds come alive. What we pull out of thin air when writing, drawing, painting,

composing, performing, or playing takes us by surprise. Art grows within us and leaves us behind, goes its own way, unfurls its wings while being read or watched or commented on, and, in doing so, links us to each other.

When I left death behind, the emergence of an impulse to shape what I had gone through in a narrative was only a matter of time. A past that is always present wants to be turned into a shared story. The art of telling stories has always been our soul's *pharmakon*: poison and cure at once, a good recipe to deal with the long-term consequences of collective trauma. Even if the narrative is a witness account, the story is not a carbon copy of what "really" happened. As for me, my testimony came out of imprecise memories of smell and sound, since we were blindfolded from the very start. I wanted to turn these recollections into an esthetic artifact, and writing was also a way of speaking up for those who could not. I did not know if they were dead, but they were definitely absent, and therefore silenced. That is why I needed to use the first person, singular and plural. My story was our story: a single, numberless death. In addition, as *they* had stolen our names, I wanted Nora Strejilevich to be a character, indicating *their* symbolic defeat. I would speak up and say everything I was unable to articulate under interrogation. Voices of that underworld guided me; I recalled my brother's screams: "You're killing me!" I was inhabited by howls that I was eager to translate.

Once I left behind my land, my language and my possible future, I carried within me a choir of voices or, rather, a chorus that prevented me from transplanting myself or settling down in one single physical place. Distance became vital to me, as if I wanted to be removed from any daily life. I circled around voices that I dared not abandon, and that matrix enabled me to persevere. In this sense, I never left my dwelling: Their voices were home. It was from this out-of-orbit that I wrote. Reporting was not enough: I needed to expose what terror meant to us. I had survived, but Gerardo and Graciela, my cousins Abel and Hugo, and so many dear friends had not. How could I share this devastation with those who could hardly place Argentina on a map?

Before: 1951–1962—Main and Back Doors

Jewish tradition is quite foreign to me. At home, we never had a Passover Seder or commemorated Rosh Hashanah. My parents were atheists and did not trust rituals. They were humanists. *Tevye the Milkman*, the books of Martin Buber and other Yiddish literary works in translation sat on the main shelf in my father's bookcase, which was our library. This type of Judaism was quite common at the time. Mother had arrived in Argentina around 1927, and Father was the son of Romanian Jews who had immigrated at around the turn of the twentieth century to the colonies founded by Baron Hirsch in the Entre Rios region for Jews seeking a better life, away from pogroms. Once in America, they preferred to recreate themselves. Their motto might have been: If Jewish *gauchos* existed in the *pampas*—the plains—why not Jewish *porteños* in Buenos Aires? In short, we did not ignore the fact that we

were Jews, but the word was not clearly defined, and that vagueness sparked no conflict.

I have a few childhood memories: a swing and a seesaw in the backyard of the neighborhood church (I've never been to a synagogue, and I'm around seven years old). The access code for the place is signing oneself as Christians do, and it is not hard to mimic. I am aware that this is an act of mischief for me, whereas it comes naturally to my friends, so it is easy to conclude that our upbringings are not the same. But this realization does not affect me.

Mother once explained to me that in public schools I would be forced out of the classroom whenever religion was taught. Religion was synonymous with Catholicism, and Jews were not welcome in those enclaves (if there were any Muslims, I never heard of them). Did they still blame us for having killed the most famous Jew, Jesus? I really do not know, but I was sent to a private school where this did not happen.

In spite of it all, I grew up in a quite open society, where most people learned to break with certain prejudices because they needed each other. Many European newcomers had experience with social struggle, which they channeled mostly into resistance to abusive policies against workers and students. It was mainly the cast of so-called heroes of the Fatherland and their heirs who, time and again, engaged in "saving" the country from egalitarian ideas. Unfortunately, Argentina has spent most of its energies on this endless confrontation.

Greater Buenos Aires, 1955. My elementary school is small: an old house in which two grades are taught in the same classroom, in which we use not the formal *usted* but the familiar *vos* to address our teachers. The director is an Italian-born artist who rejects hierarchy and authoritarian behavior. We love Pepe because he takes a personal interest in our instruction. He treats us as grownups; he shows us movies, theater, sculptures and paintings; we build a stage with him, and we can try out any art we want. I once heard that, after the mid-1970s, he hid young people who were afraid of being captured. I was pleased but not surprised. Being Jewish, then, saved me from a patriarchal, closed-minded education. Throughout those years I enjoyed the freedom of not being caged into identity paradigms—a short-lived privilege.

Somehow, I was interested in the history of our clan. I was intrigued by the tiny size of our family compared to others, with their abundance of uncles, aunts and cousins. Those faces, collected in a wooden cigar box that housed my kinship group, exerted a magic spell, and the mystery increased when my father told me that it was customary to tear one's lapel upon the death of a family member. I had never seen this gesture, though, because most of my relatives had been killed in Auschwitz, before my birth. I did not get much of a response when I asked further, but silence is also a powerful means of communication.

Buenos Aires, 1962. My family moves downtown to the Once neighborhood, which seems purposely designed to be the exact opposite of Olivos in every aspect one can fathom. We suddenly inhabit a dark, old apartment facing the busiest avenue

in town, Calle Corrientes, in the middle of the Jewish neighborhood. Father finds a huge apartment in the very building where he had spent his childhood, and there we go. That is how I have the opportunity to experience what it means to move from one country to another, before I have a passport. Even if I reject my new surroundings, I appreciate small surprises in the thick of my nostalgia for the past. I discover the bialy, a sort of poppy-seed bagel with onions, and Hebraica, a Jewish sports and social club with a great library, an antidote to the boring public high school for girls that, in my first exile, I must attend.

As I enter the classroom on my first day at this school, I see a huge wooden Christ watching us from above the green blackboard. As soon as I make some friends, I ask them to follow me in demanding that this icon be removed, or, failing that, in insisting that other religious symbols be added: the Star of David, the Muslim moon and star, a Buddhist shrine. We achieve our first defeat, and I am almost kicked out of school. They spare my student life only because it is our first rebellion.

Our flat in Once becomes my dorsal spine. It is situated in the heart of *porteño* life, whose tone and expressions were born of the encounter of Spanish with, at least, Italian, Yiddish, German, Polish and British English, and a few touches of native and African words (for example, *tango*, which seems to derive from the African word *xangó*). This language tickles my ear with its funny vocabulary; its wit touches me. I wonder, though, if my specific attraction to self-deprecating humor is a Jewish legacy. My father is a humorist, and I am sure I have inherited a bit of his spark. The image of the outsider who makes laughter of bad luck and suffering is ingrained in this tradition, in which tragedy and comedy are joined like Siamese twins. Can I call myself a Jewish writer because I want to inspire laughter through tears?

After: 1977–1982. New Skin

Years later, totally adapted to this environment, already with a degree in philosophy, I find an office of the Jewish Agency nearby. It offers travel for professionals, a cheap and easy way out of the worst dictatorship we have ever known. I am accepted, and I am getting ready to fly to Tel Aviv when our apartment is ransacked. I am taken to the “Athletic Club,” which is not a club at all, but language has abruptly changed. I miss my plane. Nonetheless, when I am released, the Agency provides me with another ticket. A week and a day have passed, and I have another skin. My sense of being has changed. I cannot yet gather to what degree.

I am in Kiryat Shmona, on Israel’s northern border, very close to a foreign war that I neither understand nor support, as is true of many around me. I study Hebrew with other Argentines who have departed just in time. Even if I make friends, I do not speak much about that gap in time. For them, my absence lasted about two weeks; for me, *eternity and one day*.⁷ During the eighteenth months I spend in Israel, I travel all over, I work here and there, and I try to figure out what is going

on around me. Whatever the reason, I am unable to adapt. Yet, it is fascinating to live in such a multi-ethnic land, where so many languages and colors overlap (those who believe that Judaism is a race should go to Israel and look around). However, I am still a foreigner, a *drom-amerika'it* (a South American), and I am not ready to face another set of political conflicts. Going back home is not an option, so I choose a centrifugal road.

Europe, 1979. I start my wandering. I spend quite a while on the Old Continent, until a city called Vancouver appears on my map. In Florence I meet with a professor from the Spanish and Italian Department at the University of British Columbia, who invites me to apply as a student. I do, and I am accepted. The location seems ideal: a peaceful country, a quiet life on the Pacific Coast, farther from my former reality than I had dared to hope. I envision Canada as a northern balcony from which the world can be watched. Maybe I will even be able to write something meaningful after breathing and relaxing.

Toronto, 1982. A couple of years down the road, I am told that I can still apply for refugee status. Since my student visa will soon expire, I try this path, but I can only do it in Toronto. I end up crossing the country to face a Canadian immigration officer who reads to me the definition of a Convention Refugee:

Convention Refugee means a person who, by reason of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion [...] is unwilling to return to that country.

- All of them apply to my case, I say.
- Racial reasons? Caucasian? He wonders, stunned.
- I'm Jewish, I respond.
- And do you believe that being Jewish is a racial issue?
- No, not me! *They* do!

Once my point is understood, I summarize Argentine contemporary history and attempt to explain that our persecution is political, that antisemitism is also political, and that “left-wing” Jews and other rebels are not wanted in a country currently headed by the military, supported by powerful civilians and the Catholic Church. In *their* view, we deserve to disappear, and I do not quite agree. After giving my account, I recall wondering: Will I always be a Jew because of the gaze of the Other? Will I always be what they say I am? And would it be better if I learned to be a Jew myself? For instance, I could start by memorizing the date of Passover. The Warsaw Ghetto rebellion began on April 19, 1943, on the first day of Passover, and I do not want to forget when that rebellion took place, even if it was the Nazis who chose that occasion to burn the Ghetto. Could this be my road of incorporating tradition, and thus the J-word? I know it is a rhetorical question. I better go on exploring my own biography.

After: 1977–2019—Exile Is Round

I will continue my search within the realm of exile and literature. When exile turns into literature, the country left behind often becomes the main character in a narrative that questions both the act of flight and those who perform it. Over time, exile becomes the story of a life condition with a round shape, as Neruda imagined, since exiles often return, in their dreams, to the place left behind. Some exiles are able to settle, but we nomads are different; our detour has no specific destination. Once the first port is lost, no other port is destiny. We tend to wander in search of the remains of vanished roots, but the effort does not often lead to a happy ending, cornered as we are by two impossibilities: going back, or feeling at home in a new place. At least, this tension often inspires creativity and critical thought.

María Zambrano, a Spanish Civil War exile who lived for forty-five years in six different countries, created a significant body of philosophical writings that was shaped by her wandering life. In her view, this way of living leads one to realize that thought is linked to experience, and that there is no rational approach that is not ingrained in the body, which is also the body politic. Whoever survives away from the national territory can also survive outside the canon, she thought. Creative freedom, in this case, is born of discomfort, since the feeling of not belonging cannot be cured.

Indeed, openness to cultural diversity is one of the great gains of this punishment and becomes almost a moral duty for the exile. At the same time, exile brings vulnerability and uprooting; in the long run, it creates a lack of belonging, or a sense of belonging to no place at all.⁸ These are not my original findings; what I do is turn these insights into stories. In my autobiographical novel *Un día, allá por el fin del mundo* (One day, somewhere at the end of the world), Nora, the main character, writes down her thoughts in her notebook when she has to leave Canada—her country of residence—and fly to her country of origin.

I cannot say I do not want to go to Argentina, but it is hard to interrupt my modest routine. I do not know how to live between two points: one foot there and one foot here (considering that here and there seem interchangeable, even if, in the long run, one is more here than there). Actually, neither is my cup of tea. In Spanish I am scared by the continuity of our history, in English by its lack of continuity. In Vancouver, my environment is staged in installments: I leave every time they need me in Buenos Aires, and, upon my return, the pieces of the game on the board have changed. Some have left, and others have arrived. The only one that stays in place is Mafaldo, the cat. Mafaldo jumps to the street when I depart and knocks at the glass door asking me to invite him in as soon as I reappear, as though nothing had happened.

From Canada, Argentina is an upside-down world. Buenos Aires is a plateau of flat roofs and an underground of tombs—a gleaming and dark city, a universe of movie theaters and black holes. In Buenos Aires I keep talking to myself in

English so that I will not fully abandon Canada, my page of snow. Always a foot in one universe and a foot in the other, two poles with no axis of rotation. This is the way I live, there or here, hesitating between spaces and times, always tiptoeing so as not to step on any hand, any face, any skin in my collection of silhouettes along the way. [...] This is why I hang on to a country outside the map: neither here nor there.⁹

Someone said that exile means not belonging to any of at least two countries. The problem here would be not a lack of home but, rather, an excess of home, leading to an ever-present feeling of incompleteness. Exiles are doomed to nostalgia for the missing side of their world.¹⁰ We are familiar, first and foremost, with exile as told in the Bible, where the word *galut* names forced expulsion from a land. This is not an abstract concept but the recollection of a brutal action committed against specific human beings. From the deportations of the Kingdom of Judah to the present, exile is linked to the body and to the suffering of women, men and children forced to create portable Motherlands. As we all know, this pain has become pervasive in our times, so much so that it has turned into the norm. The current paradigm recovers the old tradition of expulsion, but now thousands of expelled peoples are left to themselves, and the indifference of many leads to the deaths of many more. That is why the word Necropolitics has been coined in our century. Nowadays, expulsion and exile reconfigure the social body into shapes that we are only starting to visualize.

It is astonishingly hard to make people empathize with the vulnerability of exiles, even if, as Elias Canetti remarked, “the world has always been a world of exiles.”¹¹ Rereading my refugee status interview, I see how difficult it was for an immigration officer to hear what I was saying, already in the eighties.

Senior Immigration Officer: According to your application form, you're a citizen of Argentina by birth?

Nora Strejilevich: Yes, sir.

S.I.O.: And prior to coming to Canada, you were a resident there also, is that correct? You were residing in Argentina?

N.S.: Just before coming? No.

S.I.O.: Where were you living?

N.S.: I was in Brazil, and then I came here. I was living in several countries. I left Argentina five years ago.

S.I.O.: Five years ago?

N.S.: Yes, sir.

S.I.O.: And you were in Brazil, prior to coming to Canada?

N.S.: Prior, yes. And before that, I'd been in other places, but prior to coming to Canada, I was there.

S.I.O.: How long were you in Brazil?

N.S.: Approximately eight months ... approximately.

S.I.O.: What was your status there?

N.S.: Just visitor-tourist.

S.I.O.: So you are not claiming refugee status from Brazil?

N.S.: No, sir.

S.I.O.: How many countries did you live in prior to living in Brazil?

N.S.: Israel, Spain, England, and Italy.

S.I.O.: And you were there just temporarily?

N.S.: Yes.

S.I.O.: And you are not claiming refugee status from any of those countries you have mentioned?

N.S.: No. [...]

S.I.O.: Are you unwilling or unable to return to Brazil for fear of persecution because of your race?

N.S.: Brazil is not my country; it's just the country I'm coming from.

S.I.O.: I understood Brazil.

N.S.: I said Argentina.

S.I.O.: I don't think so.

N.S.: Yes.

S.I.O.: Yes, sir.

N.S.: Yes, sir.¹²

Refugees were not getting much of a hearing then, and they are getting far less of one nowadays. Paradoxically, in my case (which was quite privileged), embodying the Wandering Jew was also a plus: It gave me freedom. Since it was not clear where I had been or where I was coming from, they were unable precisely to place me in their listings. Nevertheless, I have to admit that expulsion and extermination, these two pillars of the history of Jewish people, are at my heels. I am the granddaughter and daughter of that story; I would not have been born without exile. The mere fact that I would not exist if there had been no extermination makes me responsible for this inheritance. My mother's nineteenth birthday was on the very day that the Final Solution—the deportation and murder of most of the Jews living in German-occupied Europe—was decided in Wannsee, Germany. She was most likely unaware of the macabre plan launched on her birthday. Our ignorance, however, does not affect the historical truth. A new era had begun for humanity, that of industrial extermination, which blew away the meaning of progress and Western civilization.¹³ The key category used to decide who deserved erasure was that of race, conceived (per Hannah Arendt) at the time of European Imperial expansion, and supposedly based on biological sciences. We now know that Hitler was also inspired by Jim Crow laws, which the *Führer* studied in detail to design his own hierarchies and rules for the new set of castes (“races,” according to the Nazis) to be created.

Biographies are notes spread out in a pentagram, the melody of our time resounding in a certain clef. Ours is tuned to racism; my Jewish belonging is anchored in these six letters, and I draw my vengeance in writing. Is it in this sense that I can be called a Jewish writer?

After: 2020—Native in Transit

The pandemic has brought me back to Buenos Aires. Exile is round, though, and I may keep moving in the future. I enjoy this sudden immersion in my well-known dialect, in this here that is closer than any other. I always remind myself that our alphabet is my real home, not only because it is familiar, but also because speech stores the need to un-say the world. It has been said that language is the main instrument of mankind's refusal to accept the world as it is. Accordingly, if I finally agree to define the ingredients for my existence as an Argentine Jewish woman writer in exile, I immediately feel the urge to erase each and every word from my list and start anew.

Maybe a Jewish trickster has been hiding between these lines all along, whispering this text to me:

She: who barely understands the sacred tongue, is totally disengaged from the religion of her ancestors and from any other religion. She: who cannot share nationalistic ideas, but nonetheless never denied belonging to her people. If one were to ask her: How can you still think of yourself as Jewish if you've given up this heritage, she'd reply: There are many ways in which I'm still Jewish. In fact, what is essential might be what is left after you've given it all up.¹⁴

Eventually, I might even prefigure the meaning of that slippery notion, "what is essential." Could the answer be just a verse? "Don't forget to forget the forgetting."¹⁵

I am a writer. I am a Jew. I have memory.

Nora Strejilevich, Argentine survivor of State Terror, is writer and professor of Latin American Literature. She is the author of *Una sola muerte numerosa* (*A Single, Numberless Death*), for which she received the Letras de Oro literary award for Hispanic literature in the U.S., and which has been translated into English, German and Italian. Her stories and essays in English include: "About Survivals," "Inventory," "Too Many Names," "Beyond the Boundaries of Legal Justice: A Country Called Memory," and "Genres of the Real: Testimonio, Autobiography, and the Subjective Turn." Her recent books *El lugar del testigo* and *Un día, allá por el fin del mundo* are being translated from the Spanish. nora.strejilevich@gmail.com

Notes:

1. Nora Strejilevich, "About Survivals," *Southwest Review: Human Rights in the Americas*, 85/3 (2000), pp. 364–365; also in eadem, *A Single, Numberless Death* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).
2. This type of "final solution" was applied to most of the victims, but it took years to find out how it was systematically implemented. Democracy was restored in 1984; the following year, the military cabal responsible for these crimes was condemned in public

trials, but its members were granted amnesty in 1989. By 2005, legal procedures were resumed against those who had been involved in what were finally understood to have been genocidal practices. The legal wording used to designate this new type of horror was “methodology of systematic disappearance,” and the acts thus perpetrated were designated as crimes against humanity. Witnesses gave their public accounts in the trials, and a story began to unfold. The whole country had been divided into specific territories where *task forces sucked* people into *pits*. Upon arrival at a clandestine center, captives or *packages* were identified with numbers that they had to recall instead of their names. This was often the first step. The second was torture, which had many variations; the basic one was interrogation with “Margarita,” an electroshock tool officially known as a *picana*. The third and last step was “death-theft”: The victims were injected with *pentonaval* (a “Navy-pentothal”) before being loaded onto planes and thrown into the sea, and these *death flights* would turn them into *desaparecidos*. They used to say: “Whoever bothers us here will be injected with *pentonaval* and *blow up*” (or “go up to heaven”). Those who were not to experience this last step, such as myself, can bear witness to the death factory, but, of course, with a different vocabulary.

3. Montoneros was a youth organization that formed an incipient guerrilla movement in 1968–1969 and then burst onto the Argentine political scene in 1970, gaining increasing popular support. It was the armed wing of the Peronist Youth Movement (Juventud Peronista), and its members mostly identified with the ideals of grass-roots resistance as personified by Eva Perón. Their struggle, following Perón’s doctrine, was for social justice, representing a vision that differed from other left-wing organizations at the time.
4. The “lion’s cage” was the area where people who had just been taken to this detention center were left until their fate was determined; if they were classified as *perejiles*—nobodies—they might be released.
5. Fernando Mas, *De Nuremberg a Madrid: Historia íntima de un juicio* (Buenos Aires: Grijalbo, 1999), p. 80.
6. Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death* (above, note 1), p. 88.
7. “Eternity and One Day” is a 1998 film by Theo Angelopolous portraying the last day in the life of a writer.
8. See Mariela Avila y Braulio Rojas, *La experiencia del exilio y el exilio como experiencia* (Santiago de Chile: Universidad Católica Silva Henríquez ediciones, 2018), pp. 147–164.
9. Nora Strejilevich, *Un día, allá por el fin del mundo* (Santiago: LOM, 2019), p. 15. My translation.
10. Avila y Braulio Rojas, *La experiencia* (above, note 9), pp. 93–112.
11. Elias Canetti, quoted in Susan Sontag, “Mind as Passion,” in eadem, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, 1980), p. 183.
12. Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death* (above, note 1), pp. 132–133.
13. In “Operation T4” (1940–1941), the Nazis tested killing by gassing, following alleged euthanasia criteria applied to “disabled” Germans that were considered “lives not worth living.” This technique of killing was radically enhanced in the framework of what was called the “final solution to the Jewish Problem,” after mass murder by gunfire failed to meet the Nazis’ expectations. The Wannsee Conference, held on January 20, 1942, was convened to coordinate this “Final Solution,” the shift to organized, systematic murder on an industrial scale. Gypsies, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, members

of the resistance and other groups were also considered enemies and sent to either concentration camps or death camps, but the main international threat—an active threat, according to the Nazis—was seen as the Jews, and so they were the ones designated for total eradication. These events, as well as the long-term consequences of that annihilation, have been extensively discussed by such authors as Raul Hilberg, Saul Friedlander, Hannah Arendt, Perla Sneh, Alejandro Kaufman, and many others.

14. Adapting a fragment of Sigmund Freud's Prologue to the Hebrew edition of *Totem and Taboo*, quoted in the documentary film "Sigmund Freud: A Jew without God" (2020) by David Teboul.
15. Juan Gelman, "Under Foreign Rain (Footnotes to Defeat)," V, in idem, *Unthinkable Tenderness: Selected Poems* (English transl. by Joan Lindgren; Oakland: University of California Press, 1997), p. 62.