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A WAR ON CHILDREN

by Rabbi Joseph B. Glaser, Executive Vice President, CCAR

I will never forget her face. It suddenly appeared to me during the Avinu Malkeinu, blocking out the three Torahs in the ark, and I burst into tears. And I prayed for her....

We had met only three weeks before, to the day, in the lobby of the DAIA in Buenos Aires. The DAIA is the umbrella organization of Jewish life in Argentina. Our rabbi in Argentina, Roberto Graetz, had taken me there to meet with the Board of the DAIA, to exchange views on the well-being of Argentine Jewry and on American Jewish involvement in the situation. As we walked into the lobby of the building and headed toward the elevator, a man and a woman leaped up from a bench and hurried over to intercept Rabbi Graetz. We had been delayed in traffic and were late, and although Roberto was anxious about it, he stopped and patiently listened, and responded. The woman did the talking, and although it was in rapid Spanish, I knew instantly what it was about.

She may have been about fifty. Her hair was graying, she was a bit heavy set, her features were pleasant and her eyes never left Roberto's nor did her pleading smile ever leave her face. Urgent as was her business, and cutting her heartache, she dared not risk offending the Rabino, or losing his attention. It was the persistent, supplicating smile that got to me. Her husband didn't say anything - he just stood there, stone-like, agony written all over his face and body. At one point, he looked at me, standing to the side, out of his left, blue, blood-shot eye. That eye is still staring at me.

Their twenty year old daughter had "disappeared." Along with six thousand, or more, other young people, over one thousand of them Jewish, she had been abducted by one branch or another of the Argentine Government on suspicion of left-wing, subversive activities. The Argentine Government will tell you that these young people are being taken by unofficial, right-wing groups,

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over which they have virtually no control, and that they do not know what happens to them. They admit that a lot of the kidnappers are associated with the Government, but they fear that a crackdown will produce such a right-wing backlash that the moderate Government will fall or, at least, be forced into a more repressive posture. Since breaking the back of the Communist and fellow-traveling terrorist groups who held Argentina in their grip only a few years ago, they claim that they have been steering Argentina gradually back to a reasonably liberal state, with an increasing restoration of human rights, and they don't want to rock the boat. Much of this is revenge for the outrages of the previous period, they say, and anyway, most of the people disappearing have either skipped the country or are in hiding in the interior.

Whatever the truth of the Government's disavowal of its own complicity, reports from within and without Argentina persistently claim that most of those who have disappeared have been taken to hiding places in Argentina, systematically tortured, presumably to elicit "confessions" and the implication of others and according to a growing number of sources, killed. In Brazil, I received a chilling report that the bodies were being disposed of by incineration, raising the additional spectre of the nazi Holocaust to that of the Spanish Inquisition. Rabbi Graetz, who is both the bravest and the most compassionate man I know, is beginning to doubt whether he can continue to speak words of comfort and encouragement to the hundreds of families who come to him in their panic, asking if they should say kaddish for their children.

While I was there, the Organization of American States was conducting its investigation into these charges of human rights violations, so it was deemed best that I not see Jacobo Timerman, the celebrated publisher who was under house arrest and has since been freed and "deported" to Israel. The American press typically had made a great deal of the Timerman case, as they always do when it is one of their own profession suffering some injury. (I daresay that more type has been set on the Timerman case than on the

plight of the six thousand young people, or on the holocaust in Cambodia or the butchery in Uganda.) I am delighted that Timerman was released, albeit in the crude and graceless manner in which he was freed and am aware of the fact that it is symbolic of some sort of dubious victory for freedom of the press. But in the joy of celebrating that release, the six thousand or more who have disappeared tend to be forgotten and the pressure tends to be off, undoubtedly a calculated result. The mixed good-news-bad news preliminary report of the investigation by the OAS is also a possible impediment to rescuing those captives still alive. Saying that the situation is improving, which is the gist of the report brings on a sense of relief in most quarters. People do not like to agonize about these dreadful things, and are always glad to get an encouraging report so that the tension can be released. As a consequence, the victims are likely to be forgotten and, with the spotlight off Argentina, the situation could take a turn for the worse. We have seen this socio-psychological factor at work a great deal lately: The Kremlin eases up on emigration and toughens up on treatment of dissidents; the Saudis do us the "favor" of holding back on a few percentage points on a still outrageous oil price increase and then cut back on production, or threaten to; and so forth. A little progress, a kind word and an utter villain becomes a hero at whose feet we fall in abject gratitude. It is the nice cop-mean cop syndrome and the fear is that this is what might be at play in Argentina. Fewer people are disappearing, according to the OAS as well as to reports I received there, but people are still disappearing, and there is a growing awareness that most of the victims are indeed dead.

While the leaders of the DAIA with whom I met assured me vociferously that although there had been anti-semitism in the beginning of the current reign of terror, it had been "handled" and was no longer a factor. In response to reports that Jews come in for particularly brutal treatment at the hands of the torturers, which no one anywhere seemed to deny, it was explained that the kind of people who are assigned to torture other people [illegible]

this widespread practice could have been stopped by the not altogether innocent Government, had it made such an effort. Still, the DAIA leadership requested that I pass on to American Jewry the message that wholesale accusations of antisemitism in Argentina are counterproductive in that we will lose our credibility against the time when "we may need you," as it was put. How often we American Jews are in this agonizing position of having to evaluate the veracity of an imperiled Jewish community.

And what of the disproportionate number of Jews who have been abducted - one out of five or six? Of this we did not speak at the DAIA but I talked with others. Some Jews said that most of them were involved in some kind of activity that would make them suspect. I asked the mother of a 20 year old girl if she ever feared for her daughter's safety and she replied, No, her daughter was totally apolitical. That gave me a clue as to where the line was drawn and led me to the suspicion, fortified by subsequent reports and conversations, that there was an all-out attempt to snuff out wholesale almost all left-wing activity, i.e., all political activity not in concert with the right wing policies of the Government and the forces which hold it hostage. They are not very discriminating about their targets. A whole Hashomer Hatsair youth group in Cordoba disappeared. Hashomer Hatsair is a left-wing socialist zionist movement believing that that is the way Israel should be run, but not being that involved in the host country's politics. But the word was out that they were left-wing radicals, and off they went. The Israeli ambassador sent two Israeli shlichim to Cordoba to arrange for their release - and the shlichim were kidnapped! The ambassador himself had to go to Cordoba, but he was only able to secure the release of the shlichim. The children of the youth group have not been heard of since.

Argentina will pay dearly for its war on children. In a generation, there will be little quality in public life, in the professions, in academe, or in the electorate (if such will ever exist) for that matter. By killing or driving off its idealistic youth it is dooming itself to a

status of inferiority. We all know what happens eventually to the wild-eyed, altruistic radicals in their teens and twenties, but the Argentine power-structure is ignoring this self-evident lesson of history. It is too bad; Argentina is a beautiful country, uniquely blessed with almost complete self-sufficiency, including petroleum, and could have become a world leader. Those youths would have been the intellectual, artistic and enlightened political leadership and backbone of the nation.

Just as important, if not more so, is the issue raised by the tendency to evaluate the disappearances and pros/persecutions in the assumption that the so-called emergency laws dictated by the Military Junta are legal. Remember the Jews in Buenos Aires who told me that many of the Jewish youth who had disappeared were involved in some kind of activity that would make them suspect? They had fallen into the trap of condoning the system, as had an official of the World Jewish Congress who, earlier this year, analyzed the Timerman case on the basis of just such an assumption, to the detriment of Timerman and others, without considering whether this "legality" is compatible with justice. If we were to accept "legality" per se, we would be unable to protest the fate of Anatol Scharansky, or the decision of the United Nations to seat the Pol Pot regime. Thus the dilemma of the Twentieth Century is acted out in yet another place on the Earth, challenging us to the mitzvot of redeeming prisoners and moral protest.