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Death and life at the ex-ESMA concentration camp

By Thomas Manning
For the Herald

Attending the preview of Jayson McNamara’s powerful human rights documentary ‘Messenger on a White Horse’ on Saturday last was a visceral experience which punctured my equilibrium to such an extent I am still wholly distracted by its emotional and salutary effects.

The documentary is about the Buenos Aires Herald’s brave and solitary resistance to the 1976 to 1983 dictatorship under its heroic then editor Bob Cox and seeing even only part of it has changed my perceptions of the true nature of bravery and indeed of the dangers fascism and how insidious it can be when people acquiesce to its pernicious demands or even simply just look the other way.

Equally visceral and ultimately cathartic was my visit to the former Navy Mechanics School (ESMA) in Buenos Aires where the preview was shown as it was there at ESMA that the evil of the 1976 to 1983 dictatorship reached its reprehensible apogee.

As an expatriate I am not steeped in Argentine history so before I went to the preview I did some reading in an attempt to understand something of how Argentina came to be ruled by a military junta 40 years ago and I learnt there have been six dictatorships in Argentina since 1930.

According to Argentine historian Hugo Quiroga in his 2004 book ‘In the time of the Proceso’ the dictatorships were manifestations of ‘Pretorianism’ which was the naturalised alternation between political parties and the military which tacitly established a pendulum swing between authoritarianism and democracy within the same political model.

According to Quiroga military interventions did not imply a rupture of the political system but a valid possibility inherent within it when a military alternative is justified by a loss of faith in democracy by a majority of citizens who then lend their support to military intervention and give it legitimacy.

The nature of this generally accepted and cosy civilian/military alternation changed irrevocably when in the early 1960s when at Presidents Frondizi’s & Illia’s behest French and American counter-insurgency instructors taught the Argentine military their dark arts including ‘disappearance’.

By fully embracing disappearance as an instrument of state policy the 1976 to 1983 dictatorship dammed the military to the darkest annals of 20th century world history and rightly to the dustbin of Argentine politics although disturbingly dictatorship fellow-travellers and revisionist deniers emboldened by the election of the Cambiemos government are trying to resurrect the ‘Two Demons’ theory and grant imprisoned repressors house arrest.

When I walked into ESMA’s grounds under low, grey clouds my detached, bookish understanding of dictatorship crossed over into disturbing illumination and validation when I was confronted by photographs of some of the people the last dictatorship had detained, tortured and killed there.

The victims stared at me from photographs at every angle, from signs alongside the paths, from tile murals on the sides of buildings and from the walls of the empty, echoing rooms of the complex’s buildings.

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I read some of the victims' life stories which are recounted alongside their photos but I had to stop as I felt a rising sense of impotence and bewilderment as one after the other, ad infinitum, the photos were a depressive litany of lives cut short and I shivered to think these lost souls are only the tip of the iceberg.

There were very few people about and it was deathly quiet except for the whine of jetliners passing intermittently overhead on their final approach to Jorge Newberry airport which when I looked up and saw them reminded me of the 'flights of death' for the people at ESMA who were tortured, drugged and then thrown alive into the River Plate from Air Force planes.

I put my head down to avoid seeing the planes and the photographs and hurried on toward the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo's House of Identity where the 'Messenger on a White Horse' preview was to be shown.

My unease kept rising and the air felt clammy, enveloping me in a close embrace of what I knew was guilt that I had never thought of the 30,000 disappeared as real people, just some statistic to tut-tut about, and here they were, mostly happy in the photos, posing for the cameras and all blissfully unaware that they would be soon snatched by the pitiless functionaries of the state terror machine and swallowed whole.

It's a beautiful place the ESMA complex, abundant trees and well-proportioned white buildings all in a harmonious juxtaposition but it reminded me of what Matthew said in the Bible about whitened sepulchres being beautiful on the outside but full of death and uncleanness inside.

Matthew's description no longer applies as ESMA's buildings have now been tasked as shrines to the dead & disappeared and their families as well as to inclusive community activities but as I walked among them their dark past stuck in my mind because while they lack the heaped skulls and crematorium ovens of Khmer Rouge and Nazi atrocity memorials they were to me even more powerful as the victims' presence in photographs was far more telling and palpable than gruesome, depersonalised artefacts.

The 'Messenger on a White Horse' preview was another distressing revelation as its scenes from the dictatorship times were heart-wrenching especially the desperate, eloquent mother pleading with a foreign journalist for help in the Plaza de Mayo who, when she was asked how many people were in her situation, said "thousands, thousands and thousands" at which point her plaintive distress was so powerful I wept.

Attending the preview were several of the other heroes of the dictatorship, the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo some of whom spoke movingly after the screening about the need to ensure that society never again gives state terror the cover of silence and about the complicit evil of looking the other way and unbelievably there was even a Mother present who had survived Auschwitz only to have her offspring snatched 30 years later by the Argentine heirs of Nazism and hearing the outrage recounted was another kick in the guts.

After the preview screening when the audience dispersed into the ESMA grounds the sun was still hidden behind the clouds but now there were people everywhere and the atmosphere was zestful with a band playing Salsa under the trees, people dancing to the Latin rhythms and children nearby were joyfully splashing large canvases with vibrantly coloured paints.

The clammy air now seemed refreshingly cool and I knew that it was because my visit to ESMA had achieved its purpose as I had seen close-up how unthinking acquiescence to perverse authority can easily corrupt a decent society; what Hannah Arendt's 1963 book 'Eichmann in Jerusalem' called the "Banality of Evil" and the horrendous moral and emotional tolls it can exact.

I met, albeit only through their stories and photographs, a tiny fraction of the victims and by going to ESMA I have done my bit to put the complex to work as a place for remembrance and education by grasping the need for vigilance against fascist tendency and/or the imposition of its vile tools (anywhere, not just in Argentina).

As well I saw the indispensable need, as the prosecutor in the 1985 trial of the military juntas Dr. Julio Strassera said, "for truth, the rule of law, and to remember" and I know why I must agree with him when he said, as did a redoubtable and valiant Mother of the Plaza de Mayo after the preview; "Nunca Más" (Never Again).

<http://www.buenosairesherald.com/article/211291/death-and-life-at-the-exesma-concentration-camp>

