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ARGENTINEAN NEUTRALITY AND THE “BLACK LEGEND”

AMBASSADOR DIEGO RAMIRO GUELAR*

Thank you Professor Guttman for this invitation. Thank you all for coming. I especially want to point out the presence of Professor Seymour Rubin and the Executive Director of B'nai B'rith, Sidney Clearfield, and thank them for being here. Both gentlemen are members of the Commission of Inquiry into the Activities of Nazism in Argentina. They have been working with the Commission since May 1997.

I am not going to waste my time, or yours, defending some terrible things that Argentina has done in the past; especially the things that we did to ourselves, that we did to our own citizens. However, I think that it is also important to understand some aspects of what I call the “black legend” of Argentina: its participation in world affairs and particularly its role during World War II.

I am just going to give you a few facts. Argentina declared its neutrality in 1939, at the outset of the war. Of course, in reality, there was no neutrality. Unfortunately, the two dominating ideologies all over the world in the 1930s and 1940s were the Nazi ideology and the Communist ideology. As American citizens, you may remember that the influence of these ideologies was very important across the globe, including the United States. At that time, human rights were not a relevant issue. Even though many atrocities were committed during the last two centuries, probably the worst episode of genocide in human history was the Holocaust.

Yet the Holocaust was not an accident. World War II and the Holocaust occurred within the framework of a terrible manifest des-

* Ambassador to the United States from Argentina. This paper is a transcript of the proceedings that took place at the Conference on Neutrality, Morality, and the Holocaust, which took place at the American University Washington College of Law on April 23, 1998.

tiny. This was not the manifest destiny of Andrew Jackson, but the manifest destiny of self-destruction in the world and, more specifically, in Europe.

In Latin America, we felt isolated from the war. Almost all Latin American countries pursued neutrality with the exception of Brazil. Even though Argentina was considered "neutral," eighty percent of our exports from 1940 to 1944 went to the United States and Great Britain, and just ten percent of our exports went to Italy, Japan, and Germany collectively. At the same time, 45,000 Jews arrived as refugees to Argentina between 1933 and 1945. Although 45,000 Jews is not such a large number it was the most significant number in all America, including the United States, which only opened its doors to 27,000 Jewish refugees. In those years, you must remember all frontiers were closed. Finally, Argentina severed its relations including financial trade transactions with the Axis in January 1944, declared war in March 1945, and joined the first group of nations as original members of the United Nations. We do not take much pride in these facts, but I do not think they were especially bad compared to those of the rest of the international community.

There is considerable debate surrounding what happened in the post-war years. We are trying to settle that debate, most recently, with the initiative of President Menem to establish the Commission of Inquiry in the Activities of Nazism in Argentina. This Commission involves an important number of international and Argentine personalities.

There is already one progress report, and I think there is going to be a second one in a few days. There are ten research units headed by local and foreign scholars working on several topics:

- First, these research units hope to quantify the number of Nazi war criminals according to foreign sources, namely German and Austrian.
- Second, they are working to quantify the number of Nazi war criminals according to Argentine sources. Let me note that all our archives have been opened by Presidential Decree.
- Third, they will explore the role of Italy as a transit country for Nazis and other war criminals.

- Fourth, the role of Spain as a possible route for assets and people from Nazi Germany to Argentina during World War II and the post-war era will be researched.
- Fifth, the research units will endeavor to ascertain the clandestine German naval activities in Argentine waters.
- Sixth, they will examine the utilization of Nazi and collaborationist personnel by the Argentine Army and Military Industries (“DGFM”).
- Seventh, they will examine the Argentine Central Bank’s transactions with Axis and neutral countries, as well as Argentina’s other international economic exchanges.
- Eighth, they will review Nazi investments in Argentina through front companies.
- Ninth, the research units will investigate the nostalgia of the European “New Order” and their links to Argentina’s political culture.
- Tenth, they will examine the inventory of Argentine and other archival materials used by CEANA.

Our perception and the information that we have indicate that there was no official protection of Nazi war criminals even though Argentina was an ideal country to receive those criminals because Argentina is basically a European type country. Basically, criminals used the same fake documents—documents that were being used by the Jewish refugees—false Red Cross passports. In Argentina, there has been a well-established Jewish community for a hundred years. These Eastern European, Polish, and German names were the best aliases for Nazi criminals to arrive without suspicion. These criminals were mistaken for, or disguised as, members of the Argentine Jewish community. Nazi criminals could arrive without any special protection by denying their German background and claiming their Jewish ancestry.

Of course, Nazi criminals were probably also aided by the complicity of a few members of the German community, an old community established in Argentina. Many of us have no doubt that some in this community privately helped these criminals to establish themselves in Argentina during those years.

Another “black legend” relates the Nazi connection to the Peronist Party. However, the Peronist Party did not exist during the war; it was founded in 1945 and 1946. During the war, from 1939 to 1945, there were a series of different military regimes and there was a dispute between the regimes more closely connected to the Axis, and those more closely aligned with the Allies, that is why I do not think that all the stories of the “black legend” are true.

We hope that the work of this Commission is going to shed light on what happened during those years. I do not want to take up any more of your time. Thank you for your patience.