



MUSEO
SITIO DE MEMORIA
ESMA
EX CENTRO CLANDESTINO
DE DETENCIÓN, TORTURA Y EXTERMINIO

Webinars@GDL: How is a site transformed from being a site of atrocity to a site of Memory?

My name is Alejandra Naftal, I am the Director of ESMA Memory Site Museum, former clandestine Center of detention, torture and extermination.

To begin with, I would like to talk to you about the Argentine experience. Between 1976 and 1983 my country suffered a military dictatorship of extreme characteristics that implemented State terrorism, which consisted of using the State resources outside the law to persecute the opposition and to have total control of the people.

The balance that this practice left, is six hundred (600) places of illegal detention throughout the country; a number of thirty thousand (30000) missing people, thousands of exiles and political prisoners and the practice of stealing babies. Five hundred (500) children were born in clandestine detention centers and given to families of the perpetrators. Their mothers are still missing and these children are the living disappeared that we are still looking for.

I have to say that Argentina is sadly known for the figure of the "DESAPARECIDO". The missing person is a hostage, an illegal detainee, someone who could have been murdered but his or her situation is unknown. We call for the setting of this crime as "continuing offence" because there is no evidence on the body.

From the very beginning of the military dictatorship, human rights organizations, formed by mothers, grandmothers, wives, husbands, children, sisters and brothers started the struggle towards Memory, Truth and Justice.

During the last forty (40) years of Memory, Truth and Justice, we have experienced advances and drawbacks.

[1983 -In Nineteen eighty three, the military dictatorship comes to end and democracy starts and continues up to today.

1984 -In Nineteen eighty four the National Commission of Missing People is created to make the victims of State Terrorism testify.

1985 - In Nineteen eighty five, with all testimonies collected by the Commission, the trials to the military Commanders are carried out in the national courts. They were convicted as the responsible ones for the crimes.

1986 y 1987 - In Nineteen eighty six and seven, even though there was enough evidence to go on judging officers and non-commissioned officers there were military uprisings which made the fragile and incipient democracy pass laws on impunity that didn't allow other trials to the place.



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1989 - In Nineteen eighty nine, the new government pardoned perpetrators. In this way, all the convicts were set free. A dark period started in the process of seeking Memory, Truth and Justice. However, the Human Rights Organizations found creative judiciary ways to go on investigating such as the international trials that were carried on in Spain, France, Italy and Germany or the trials for truth whose purpose was to search information and not to search sentences, that is to say the right to know what happened to all the disappeared detainees.

2003 - In Two thousand and three, a new phase starts to articulate the claims between the Human Rights Organizations and the Executive Power.

2004 - In Two thousand and four, the Legislative power repealed the impunity laws and the trials to the perpetrators began in all the country.

2007 - In Two thousand and seven, the first oral trial related to ESMA started. So far, there are seven hundred eighty nine cases of victims, one hundred and six accused, sixteen convicted and thirty nine prisoners.]

As many of you already know, ESMA, which stands for Navy School of Mechanics, is a seventeen (17) hectares property in the middle of Buenos Aires city. It used to be a place where the military men studied in Argentine. Between nineteen seventy six and nineteen eighty three it worked both as a school and as a clandestine center for detention, torture and extermination.

In ESMA, near five thousands (5,000) men and women were detained-disappeared. Social and political militants of armed and unarmed revolutionary organizations, workers and trade unionists, students, professionals, artists and members of religious orders. Most of them were thrown alive into the sea.

In ESMA, the Navy systematically planned kidnappings and committed murders. Here, prisoners were kept hooded and shackled. They were tortured. Here, they were disappeared.

In ESMA, children were born in captivity and taken away from their mothers. Most of them were illegally appropriated or stolen. Many of them are the living disappeared we are still searching for.

A crime against humanity was committed here.

What can be done about the former clandestine center? These kinds of questions were present throughout the history of democracy in Argentina. I believe the answers changed according to the historical context. Is that the reason why Memory is constructed from the present?

In the nineties (90'S), for example, the president at the moment, suggested demolishing the ESMA buildings to build a National Pacification Monument. This was stopped by a Mother of



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Plaza de Mayo and the wife of a disappeared man at ESMA who submitted an action of protection, an “amparo proceeding” at the Courts to prevent the demolition.

Later, in two thousand and four, a different president declared all the ESMA as the Space for the Memory, Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

Little by little the military started leaving the premises, until in two thousand and seven, the Officer’s Club building, which was the place where prisoners were kept and tortured, was completely recovered.

After long debates on what to do about the clandestine centers, in two thousand and twelve, the museological project, that you have visited, started.

Finally, in twenty and fifteen, The ESMA Memory Site Museum was opened.

ESMA Memory Site Museum is a physical, material and judiciary evidence in the trials about Human Rights violation and a fundamental proof of the State Terrorism.

The Navy handed on the place completely empty in a destructed and abandoned condition. We must remember that until two thousand and seven the Navy was in charge of this building and erased all the clues and hints of the functioning of the clandestine center. The building had no objects, proofs, documents. All the information we handle of what happened here comes from the testimony of the survivors. So far, the perpetrators have never testified officially about what happened here and what happened with the missing people.

Our challenge in the museum is to transform this place of horror and tragedy in a place of memory, transmission and legacy for the present and future generations.

During the creative process of working in the current exhibition, we carried out many debates. The executive power and the civil associations summoned a multidisciplinary team formed by curators, architects, historians, researchers, journalists, designers, audiovisual specialists, computers programmers, poets, writers and artists, among others.

But I would like to halt with the following question. Why was it possible to create this museum? There have been many debates in Argentina about what to do with these former concentration camps all over the country. Many of them have already become memory sites and are signalled. However, the debates go on.

But in the particular case of ESMA, the creation of the museum was possible because there was a strong commitment and political will from the Argentine state; because there is justice as the trials are being carried out in the courts and because time has passed in the relationship between history and memory.

During many years there were different opinions about what to do with these places. Some voices from the Academy, some others directly affected by the experience were heard. Some said



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these places should be demolished; some others thought they should become sacred places; others preferred recreating what had happened.

Some people talked about the power of the void. All these debates nourished the Project. That is why the museum is the result of the debates and the consensus.

As I was telling you, Memory is built in Argentina from the very beginning of the Dictatorship in 1976. This Project included the survey of all the existing documentation in the archives of the human Rights Organizations, in the judiciary cases, in the academic texts, in the literary, artistic and journalistic resources; above all and the most importantly, the survivor's testimonies.

Finally, after three years working on the project the museum opened on May two thousand and fifteen. The event turned out to be a national and international political act, where the president with her ministers, human rights organizations and a large number of general public participated.

Two years and a half after its opening, the museum is finding its place in the society. So far we have received around one hundred thousand visitors of diverse public. Also, we have been presented to be part of the list of the UNESCO world heritage never again.

We still have large challenges ahead of us. How are we going to grow? Are we going to become a research center? Are we going to have collection of objects?

How will we face the challenge of approaching mass audiences?

The Project of this museum emerged when the government in power empathized with the human rights movement. In December twenty and fifteen a new government with a different political view came to power. It does not have the memory, truth and justice policy as a priority. However, the present scenario makes us rethink if the memory of State terrorism has set itself among its fundamental democratic agreements.

A few months ago, Christian Duerr, from the Mathausen Museum in Austria visited the Site. So I asked him if he believed that when someone visits a museum like these ones they become a better person. Neither of us is sure of the answer to this question.

However, what I am certain about is that these places have to exist. And that how they exist will be the result of the debates of each historical moment.

It is essential for us to participate in these meetings because Latin America has debates on what to do with these repression places. In this way, I summon you to know the Argentine experience about the facts in the seventies (70's) which still interpellate us now.



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Advances and Drawbacks

- 1983 - End of the Military Dictatorship. Raul Alfonsín is elected democratic president.
- 1984 - CONADEP National Commission of missing persons
- 1985 - Juicio a las Juntas - Trial of the Juntas
- 1986 - Ley de Punto Final - Full Stop Law
- 1987 - Ley de Obediencia Debida - Law of Due Obedience
- 1989 - Indulto a los represores - Pardon – Amnesty given to the Perpetrators
- 2003 – The President Nestor Kirchner requested forgiveness in name of the State. *«I am the son of mothers»*
- 2004 - Congress declares Law of Due Obedience and Full Stop Law's as null and the Supreme Court declares that crimes against humanity do not prescribe
- 2007 - 2016 - Trial Megacausa ESMA