



Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number

Jacobo Timerman , Ilan Stavans (Introduction) , Toby Talbot (Translation) , Arthur Miller (Foreword)

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The bestselling, classic personal chronicle of the Argentine publisher's ordeal at the hands of the Argentine government--imprisoned and tortured as a dissenter and as a Jew--that aroused the conscience of the world.

Jacobo Timerman (1923-1999) was born in the Ukraine, moved with his family to Argentina in 1928, and was deported to Israel in 1980. He returned to Argentina in 1984. Founder of two Argentine weekly news magazines in the 1960s and a commentator on radio and television, he was best-known as the publisher and editor of the newspaper *La Opinión* from 1971 until his arrest in 1977. An outspoken champion of human rights and freedom of the press, he criticized all repressive governments and organizations, regardless of their political ideologies. His other books include *The Longest War: Israel in Lebanon, Cuba: A Journey*, and *Chile: A Death in the South*.

The Americas, Ilan Stavans, Series Editor

Winner of a 1982 Los Angeles Times Book Prize

Selected by the New York Times for "Books of the Century"

With a new introduction by Ilan Stavans and a new foreword by Arthur Miller.

Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number Details

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From Reader Review Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number for online ebook

Seelochan Beharry says

Jacobo Timereman's "Prisoner without a name , Cell without a number" is truly remarkable book. In this work, Timereman writes about his story and takes us into his world of imprisonment and torture in Argentine jails. The power of falsehoods and myths believed by his torturers drove them to inflict torture and to believe that they doing is right and justified. This book has to be read to be believed and any commentary simply cannot do it justice. It is remarkable message for us and our times. For example, in one instance he wrote that the tortured and the torturers are a small fraction of the population, and the bulk of the population is not involved! Unfortunately, it is true.

Meant to read this book years ago, and finally did. It is a book that is a must read. Glad I did.

If you read one serious book a year this would be a fine choice. (The paperback is 120 pages and the language is easy to read.)

Highly recommended.

Seelochan Beharry

Author: The Prehistories of Baseball (McFarland, 2016)

Diane says

I'm interested in this because Christopher Hitchens mentions it in his memoir. He had been in Argentina when Timereman was imprisoned and tried to reach him.

Meaghan says

This is unlike any other political prisoner's memoir I've ever read -- not that I've read many, perhaps five -- in that Timereman was an actual political activist and not just an ordinary person who got swept up in the ever-rising tide of persecution. The setting is Argentina but, as Timereman himself pointed out, his story could just as easily have taken place in Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany or any of scores of other countries.

I enjoyed this and it really made me think, but it's not for everyone. It's not written in chronological order; Timereman skipped around quite a lot, at times describing the tortures he went through, at times talking about the anti-fascist newspaper he founded which lead to his imprisonment, at times reflecting on the state of Argentina and what leads an entire country to behave this way. Timereman was Jewish and believed he was imprisoned in large part because of that, so he spent many pages talking about anti-Semitism in Argentina.

I think this would be a good book for people wanting to learn recent Argentine history, as that is a topic examined at length. I really admired Timereman for taking a stand, knowing full well just what he was getting into, but doing it anyway because someone had to. But if you're simply looking for a book on what it's like to be a political prisoner, there are better ones out there for that.

Trebور says

This is a harrowing trip thru the political and social meltdown that was Argentina in the 70s as Timerman recounts the torture he endured in a number of Argentina prisons. Timerman is a journalist and articulates well the completely irrational excesses of the dirty war that got him arrested but never charged. It's also a pretty good description of the political realities, anti semitism and general chaotic mafiosi corruption that has plagued the nation since Peron. Timerman's historical perspective and breadth of knowledge, as well as his more or less political objectivity (he was really a voice of moderation in a country that had completely lost its political center and fallen prey to the violent blackmail coming from left and right) makes this a particularly valuable book considering the subject matter. He's also a controversial figure and one can't be completely sure there is total transparency here as he is connected to generals, presidents, left wing guerrillas etc. But what major journalist would not have such connections at such a time? Worth a read for any student of Argentina.

Michelle says

AMAZING account of the Dirty War, very depressing, but WELL worth the read! Timerman's writing style was really engaging, loved it.

Maurizio Manco says

"Un mondo di tribunali. Un mondo di accusati. Tribunali civili, militari, religiosi: ogni cosa dev'essere giudicata, è giudicata e sarà giudicata. E sempre, lungo l'intero corso della storia, e anche ora, io sono fra gli accusati, io che non ho mai giudicato nessuno, io che non giudicherò mai." (pp. 118, 119)

Ed says

Torture indeed. Jacobo Timmerman reveals a lot, the most telling is the policy of the kidnappers, torturers and executioners who worked for the regime in Argentina--or who might have been employed by a rival faction within the armed forces--was when a person who was "disappeared" (he didn't just disappear but was disappeared) and his family and associates were able to pinpoint the last time and place he was seen, possibly coming close to the identities of his kidnappers and even getting the Catholic Church or organizations like Amnesty International interested in the case. When this happened the jailers would simply kill the person they were holding--extra-judicial execution at its most basic--and bury him in an unmarked grave so no one would ever know who had taken and held him. Amazing to think of the dashed hopes of families who, often at great risk to themselves and generally at significant expense, felt they were coming close to the solution of where their loved one was only to have the trail go cold since he was now dead and no one had ever even heard of him.

Disturbing and frightening book, an eyewitness to the place of Argentina among Western Hemisphere nations in the forefront of torture and illegal killing of their citizens.

Tyler Sprecker says

“The white walls had been recently painted. Undoubtedly they once had names on them, messages, words of encouragement, dates. They are now bereft of any vestige or testimony.” It wasn’t just the walls of his cell, it was the official transcript of Argentinian society; silence masked the truth, and just because nothing was being said didn’t mean there was nothing to say. Jacobo Timerman had something to say. “Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number” retells the consequences of speaking out at a time and place where having an opinion was considered political subversion, and punishment and justice fungible.

Timerman was founder and editor of *La Opinion*, an Argentine newspaper, who became one of the many desaparecidos after being arrested without charge for political commentary about the crisis faced by Argentina following the rightwing military coup of 1976. Timerman used his paper to criticize the terror tactics of both the military junta in power and the Peronist rebels they sought to eradicate, and to advocate for a political solution.

Aside from recounting the barbarity of life as a desaparecido, Timerman offers the reader an intimate look at the anatomy of a totalitarian state, and a social critique of the environment that birthed it. Some of the methods implemented by the military junta were standard issue totalitarian tactics (“to ignore the complexities of reality, or even eliminate reality, and instead establish a simple goal and a simple means of attaining that goal.”), others were more innovative and cunning (e.g. the targeting of psychiatrists on suspicion of their helping dissidents to cope with issues related to subversive activities). This book is unique in that it illuminates both the micro and the macro of the Argentine crisis of the late 1970s, and should occupy the reading list of anyone interested in Argentine history or the potential evolution of political crisis.

Scott says

Good grief, I could not finish this short book fast enough. I thought it would be about the experience of a prisoner under Argentina’s dictatorship. Wrong. That becomes nearly a side story, allowing Timerman to expound upon anti-Semitism and Zionism.

Had the book actually been about being a prisoner, I would have found it much more rewarding. The passages that do deal with it are extremely well-written and both extremely disturbing and enlightening. The depiction of a dehumanizing system is very important reading.

However, I had a hard time with his theorizing. The way he easily threw around terms like fascist, communist, terrorist, nazi, etc., was irresponsible and un-analytical. The self-righteousness that he always had the right answer and understood the correct path put me off.

Finally, there was the major role Zionism played in the book. Timerman clearly believed anti-Semitism was universal and inevitable and that the solution was Zionism. I don’t discount how horrific anti-Semitism is, nor the anti-Semitic nature of the Argentinian regime, but Zionism is not the answer. The moral superiority he places in a movement that destroyed and ethnically-cleansed the Palestinian people is intolerable. The tragic irony is that while he was writing about his experiences with torture in his new Tel Aviv home, Palestinians were being tortured in similar ways by Israel - the very Zionist project he so ardently supported.

Eric says

As the publisher of one of the few domestic newspapers to openly criticize the violence of both the left and the right in 1970s Argentina, Jacobo Timerman was a marked man. Detained without charge by the military junta in 1977 and held in clandestine concentration camps until his sudden release and deportation to Israel in 1979, Timerman was subjected to extensive physical torture as well as the psychological trauma of isolation cells, humiliation at the hands of his captors, and ongoing uncertainty over his fate and that of his family and peers. *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* is a poignant and poetic memoir of Timerman's rapid descent from being a well-known public figure to a nameless and hidden victim of the 1976-1983 military junta's oppression, but also an exploration of the societal passivity that permits totalitarianism to take hold.

Timerman's book gives a unique take on this complicated country. Though he began life as an immigrant, Timerman rose to a place among Argentina's intelligentsia. As a journalist, he enjoyed access to the nation's elites and to the corridors of power. As a detainee, he acknowledges a certain level of special treatment (few others had the celebrity of Timerman, which even led members of the junta and foreign governments to intervene on his behalf). But Timerman did not escape the sadistic nature of the regime, and he gives a measured account of the torture applied to him and his fellow political prisoners.

Parallel to this narrative, Timerman also explores wider psychological and political themes. He writes eloquently of the sense of asphyxiation as all rational paths for resolving the political impasse confronting Argentina in the mid 1970s were closed off by the extremes (especially the right's fervent mission to restore order by any means). Chapter Five is particularly effective at conveying the dwindling space for reason in those tumultuous days, and is a valuable perspective for anyone seeking to understand the onset of the dictatorship.

Timerman also explores the prisoner's condition, ruminating on the themes of hope, memory, and prisoner-captor relations. His insights are chilling: "Memory is the chief enemy of the solitary tortured man", "Aside from suicide, there's one other temptation—madness", "Hope is something that belongs to the interrogator rather than the prisoner. The interrogator always seems to feel that he can succeed in modifying the will of the interrogated."

Another prominent theme of the book is the well-documented anti-Semitism of the Argentine junta. The regime emulated many aspects of the Nazi machine, from an ideological obsession with rooting out the "enemy within" to the institutionalization of concentration camps and extermination as state policy. While the junta considered many groups suspect and targeted many sectors of society ruthlessly, Jews were often singled out for special humiliation and persecution by the regime. Timerman describes the repeated interrogations of his faith and his presumed ulterior motives as a Jew. In a passage at the heart of Chapter Nine, he relays the barrage of questions directed at him during his appearance at a military tribunal on an unspecified charge. Timerman details the impossibility of fitting the complexities of his life and views—his immigrant childhood, his burgeoning political awareness, his dalliance with Socialism and commitment to Zionism, his opposition to Perónism and Stalinism, his firm beliefs in a free press, the rule of law, the necessity of avoiding the temptation to use totalitarian tactics to counter perceived subversion—into tidy responses for the binary questions of his interrogators, who simply seek verbal confirmation of their position that he is a Zionist who is part of an international conspiracy to undermine Argentina. His captors inform him that World War III has begun, that Argentina is the vanguard in thwarting left-wing terrorism, that Jews

have a hand in the anti-Argentine campaign that threatens to undermine the war effort. Timerman is bemused but not altogether surprised by this pastiche of conspiracy theories, ideological fervor, and deep-seated discrimination—what he terms "hatred transformed into fantasy"—masquerading as an organizing principle for society. After all, we've seen this before.

Writing after his release and expulsion from Argentina to Israel, a country he barely knows, Timerman dedicates much of Chapter Eleven to asserting his view that the then ongoing Argentine dictatorship demonstrated that the world had learned nothing from the Holocaust. Both were permeated by the same silence from the majority, the same political accommodations with totalitarian intolerance, the same terror visited upon scapegoat minorities. As Timerman notes in a passage describing the period not long before the coup,

What there was, from the start, was the great silence, which appears in every civilized country that passively accepts the inevitability of violence, and then the fear that suddenly befalls it. That silence which can transform any nation into an accomplice.

It is this broader discussion—of the public passivity which can pave the way to totalitarianism—that elevates this book from a tale of one man's torture at the hands of a distant dictatorship, to a work with continuing resonance in our current era and those yet to come.

Lachryma says

It may sound pompous or some such to say it, but this is an important book. There is only one portion I didn't like, a military trial intercut with musings, and perhaps that was meant to meander and go on for too long simply to mirror the trial itself. Besides that, everything was to my liking, though I can't say I exactly enjoyed it. The events relayed are painful, even with the intentional sparseness and deadpan tone, and it is a book that isn't thought-provoking so much as question-provoking. How does mindless, irrational, destructive hate work? How close am I or my society or those I know to unspeakable acts, throwing away human rights, "following orders"? What would or could one do in the face of a society bent on simultaneous terrible actions and numbing obliviousness?

This book, and probably no one, has the answers to the questions it raises. But they must be raised, and the author's experience must be told, and that is why this book is important.

Timothy Dymond says

'Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number' is not the book I was expecting. It has the reputation of being a lyrical account of being a political prisoner and torture victim, and I had in mind that it would be an impressionistic, almost 'magic realism' style narrative. Instead it is much more prosaic and analytical, which, given Jacobo Timerman's journalistic background (he was arrested for his editing and writing for the daily 'La Opinión') is what I should have expected.

Nevertheless this is an important and useful book for anyone looking at the history of Argentina's 'dirty war'

of the 1970s. Timerman is far from a radical leftist when he is arrested by the dictatorship of General Jorge Rafael Videla. He frequently criticised what he called ‘Fascists of the Left and Right’ together, and he was no fan of the leftist guerrilla group the Montoneros. At one point Timerman actually editorialised for a sort of partial military coup - in which the Argentine Congress would pass ‘extraordinary legislation’ so that the army could combat terror. The liberal Peronist politician to whom he put this proposition responded ‘once we allow the military to step through the door, they’ll take possession of the entire house’. Timerman must have realised the accuracy of this prediction given the amount of time he spends in the rest of the book dissecting the anti-Semitic, anti-democratic beliefs of his torturers, just as they were deeply interested in his Jewishness and his liberal Zionist outlook.

Calling the military ‘Fascist’ is not just a term of political abuse. Timerman found they had a fully worked out anti-Semitic ideology. The most elaborate definition in the book is as follows: ‘Argentina has three main enemies: Karl Marx, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of society; Sigmund Freud because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of the family; and Albert Einstein, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of time and space’. The Argentine military ideologues believed they were already involved in World War III, but unlike the Nazis they would win. Timerman spends much of the book discussing why Jews feature so prominently in such demonising world-views, and he reaches explicitly Zionist conclusions about why the Jewish people need their own state. Timerman felt let down by the Diaspora Jewish community of Argentina itself, and after he was freed he moved to Israel (although his son Hector Timerman remains a prominent Argentine politician).

Other Goodreads reviewers are a bit put off by Timerman’s outright proselytising for Zionism, however it is worth bearing in mind that in Israel he became a major critic of its government. In 1982 he wrote a book called ‘The Longest War: Israel’s Invasion of Lebanon’ which was extremely negative about that invasion. He also publicly compared Israeli government policies toward Palestinians to Apartheid in South Africa. Timerman never forgot that the Argentine military dictatorship, even at its most anti-Semitic, remained an ally of the US. His criticism of the Reagan administration’s distinction between ‘authoritarian’ supportable regimes (Argentina), and ‘totalitarian’ (Communist) regimes meant he got attacked by right-wing US critics such as William Buckley, Norman Podhoretz, and Irving Kristol.

The book is short, but packs in a lot of information. At his best Timerman matches the political analysis with a strong sense of what it feels like to experience total confinement and isolation. He was tempted by suicide and often doubted his own sanity. But as another prisoner said to him: ‘Don Jacobo, keep going. That’s the important thing, not to let them knock you down. If you keep going, everything will someday be resolved’.

Joe Stack says

An engaging memoir. My take away is Timerman’s observation coming from experience that extreme right-wing and left-wing governments are little different when receiving criticism. Sometimes, you don’t want what you support to come into power. This is a short, readable memoir that goes quickly because of the author’s experience writing for newspapers.

Jon Beadle says

Bearing witness in mediocre form.

Charlotte says

This is a stunning, brief, moving description of existing in solitary confinement. Written by a newspaper publisher, captured during unrest in Argentina. Fascinating for the glimpse into South American political history. Wrenching and illuminating on the nature of identity and compassion.

Constanza says

This biography by a Jewish Argentinian journalist tells the story of how it feels to be a prisoner during the military regime in Argentina (1977). This book is powerful regardless of when and where this happened, since it reminds us about the universal human tendency to justify oppression, torture and homicide for what a regime perceives as self defense and actions taken for the greater good. Very evocative of the justifications for war provided by the current administration to invade Iraq and torture potential 'enemy combatants.' Timerman doesn't provide much detail about torture techniques as much as how the torture is aimed at stripping a person of his identity and hope.

Tweedledum says

Jacobo Timerman tells the shocking story of his imprisonment and torture in Argentina in the late 70s interweaving it with reflections from his perspective as the owner and editor of an Argentine newspaper that struggled to maintain some integrity as Argentina sank deeper and deeper into totalitarianism. Timerman's ordeal reveals how frighteningly close to the surface old hatreds lie. Thus antisemitism appears like the mythological hydra. Cutting off one head leads only to more growing if the climate is right. I was very ignorant of this history though I had at least heard of Peron. Evita ensures his name lives on. Timerman repeatedly reminds the reader that turning a blind eye in the face of abuse and injustice is tantamount to condoning the abuse. a compelling and important read.

Sandra Riley says

Part autobiography, political analysis, and cautionary tale for our own times in the U.S., about a Ukrainian immigrant who became a prominent journalist in Buenos Aires, Argentina in the 1970s who was imprisoned, without a formal charge, tortured, and placed in solitary confinement by the totalitarian regime then in power. The muzzling of the press was just one consequence of the tyranny that descended on a once sophisticated society that fell into irrationality. As the author writes: "Everything that happened once can happen again" (78).

Anil says

Part essay and part narrative (no prisoner to form), a mind-breaking and heart-hurting account that addresses

authoritarianism, anti-semitism and the Argentine soul with equal attention and convinces the reader of the common tragedy of those apparently diverse strands. And in his treatment of the political, Timerman doesn't neglect personal and psychological explorations from the interior of his cell, musing on madness, suicide and tenderness. Devastating and outstanding.

lindsey says

A true tale of the mindset behind Argentina's dirty war, and how nationalism precipitates the destruction of a prosperous nation's core values. The value of responsibility is corrupted by silence and abuse of power, while citizens are no longer citizens--they are subversives and then "los desaparecidos," a supposed minority that threatens Videla and his regime.

I can't imagine anyone coming to regret reading Jacobo Timerman's testimony. It is relevant not only to Argentina's history, but any nation under threat by its own bullheaded pride. Extreme nationalism and populism as well as the desire to return to supposed glorious past are what *Preso sin nombre, celda sin número* cautions us all against.
