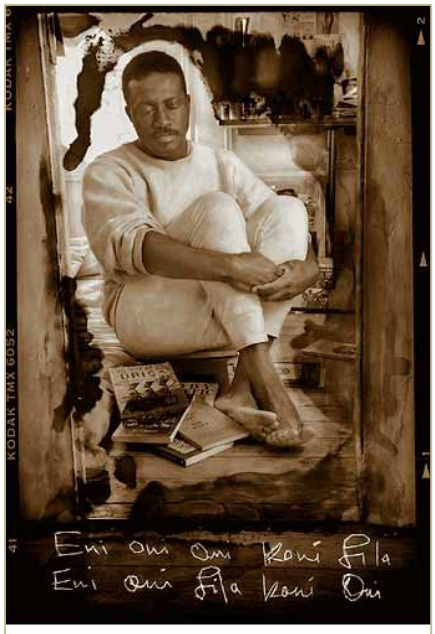
In Search of Exile

The city of Salta lies on a rocky plateau of northern Argentina where the vast grasslands of the Pampas have given way to the foothills of the Andes mountains. It was my first trip to this provincial city, but not my first time in Argentina. A decade before, a young man with no direction and little potential, I had spent an indolent year living in an ancient hotel in the red-light district of Buenos Aires which bordered the ornate mausoleum-filled Recoleta cemetery. Aimless and insecure I ate my breakfast of croissants and *café con leche*, and then would wander along the grimy main avenue, often stopping at a little shop to buy a newspaper. The shop had seen better days, it was sparsely stocked — a few rolls of film, half-filled racks of magazines, dusty toys, sooty packages of dress socks. In the front window, a few faded cans of soda sat alongside a dusty antique camera. The owner of the shop, a small grey man with a Russian accent, elderly and unfriendly, at first took little notice of me but over time began to take interest in the shy American who always greeted him with a strained smile. We would talk about politics and the weather often failing to comprehend one another through our shaky accented Spanish.



A Person that has a head does not havea hat. A person that has a hat does not have a head.

AYO, YORUBA (NIGERIA)

One day he noticed me admiring the camera, and gave a little frown. He had been born in St. Petersburg around the time of the Bolshevik revolution. As a teenager he developed a passion for photography, and after saving up for several years, sent to Germany for a 1920 Zeiss Ikonta, a folding camera with leather bellows and small hand-ground lens; top of the line, the best he could afford. It was his prize possession but remained unused. Shortly after this purchase his family made a sudden decision to abandon the privations of the new Soviet republic for a better life in Argentina. Arriving in South America very poor, they could not afford film and processing for his beloved camera. And by the time they could, more modern cameras using different film had arrived. The Zeiss remained unused and eventually made its way to the shelf of the family store where it sat for almost fifty years. I asked him if I could examine the camera. “Too much trouble,” he replied shaking his head; and I didn’t insist. The next morning, I immediately noticed the camera was gone from its shelf in the window. He looked up and without greeting said gruffly, “I’ll sell it to you, give me five dollars.” With no hesitation and little reflection, I handed over the money. I pocketed the camera and left. It was the last time I would enter the store.

Not long after, I was back in New York and the camera made its way from his shelf to mine. Years passed and my photographic aspirations became a reality and a profession, but not the joy and inspiration I had hoped for. It was a business, I made money, met and

photographed famous people, entered the world of glamour I had dreamed about; but I was unhappy self- absorbed, and dishonest. Then, mostly through my own doing, it all fell apart. The phone went silent, clients dried up, the money gone, my girlfriend packed and left. I was alone with my many cameras, expensive equipment, little to do, nowhere to go.
Putting it all away, I turned to the dusty little Zeiss, hardly touched since my return from Argentina and began photographing empty streets and desolate landscapes, eventually turning back to people.

When there's no more bread, eat cake.

I'm so lucky I'm an orphan.

GERTRUDE AND DINAH,
YIDDISH (POLAND)

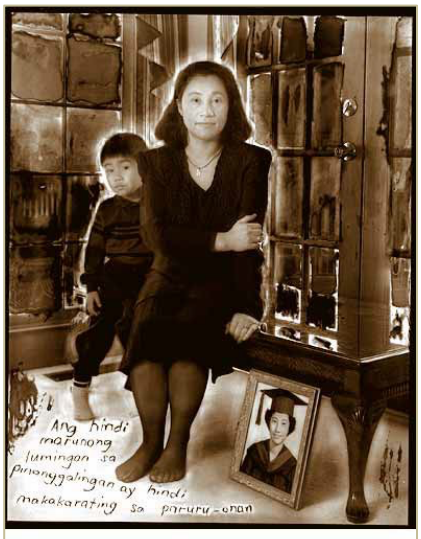
It started with a wedding. Friends of mine, a taciturn Japanese man marrying a brash charismatic Jewish woman. The clash of families at the reception was charming and hilarious, made more so by the way they all tried to ignore it. I took a blurry photograph of them that day, kissing on a bed. I added two phrases elicited from friends and relatives, one in Japanese the other in Yiddish. I was trying to be humorous, the Japanese phrase said, "Only a dog should eat the arguments between a man and his wife," a lucky marriage saying, I was told. And the Yiddish, very similar, "Congratulations! Don't worry, trouble's coming!" I mailed off the image/text photo to the newlyweds and waited anxiously for their amused, impressed, grateful response. It never came. They were furious. They didn't speak to me for months. By using words I didn't understand, I had offended them terribly. With this first misstep I had stumbled onto a medium for telling a story about words and how precious they are, especially when they are words we have left behind.

You can throw a stick into the river,
it will not become a fish.

War is not nice.

FATOUMATA, SUSU (GUINEA)

Gertrude and Dinah, my grandmother and great aunt, were the first in the series. Two sisters from an impoverished Polish village near Warsaw, survivors from a lost world. In the early 1920's, just as my Buenos Aires shopkeeper and his family were making their way to South America, my grandmother's long- absent father miraculously appeared in New York and sent for his wife and four daughters, freeing them from the hunger and danger of their native world. Exile with no return, they were departing from a culture soon to be cut off at its roots by terrible events. They couldn't have known how lucky they were.



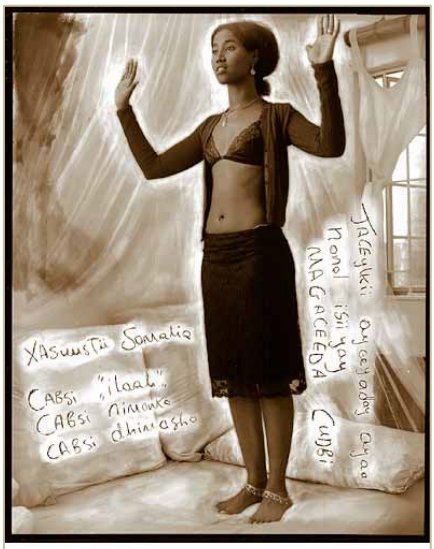
If you don't look back to where you came from, you'll never reach your destiny.

DELIA, TAGALOG (PHILIPPINES)

Now, with my grandmother gone and great aunt in her mid- nineties, the Yiddish world of my family is almost gone — its jokes, its songs, the whole texture and flavor of Jewish Eastern Europe. My grandparents managed to keep it alive in their generation, but it can no longer survive without them, the children of its soil.

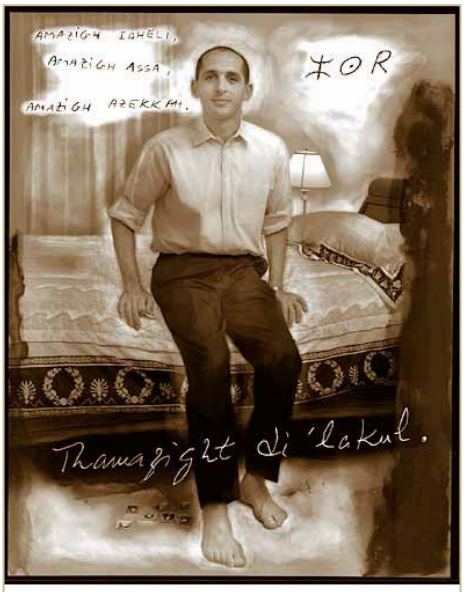
I was sucked into an obsession, finding and photographing as many people in as many languages as possible. A Chinese dissident who had twice been sent to the countryside for reeducation during the Cultural Revolution. A Nigerian, son of a murdered diplomat, who rediscovered faith in his ancestral religion after attending an African-American Yoruba ceremony. An Egyptian woman, immersing herself in the study of Arabic literature and history, yet rejected by her father for being too Westernized. A Somali woman, her world utterly destroyed by war, and men. A Navaho, living in exile in his own land. I started showing the work and won a few grants, it was very exciting, doing photography on my own terms, telling a story I could believe in. And when the opportunity came to travel to another country to pursue the Exile Project, I was inextricably drawn back to Argentina.

Arriving in an unfamiliar part of Buenos Aires to stay with the friend of a friend, it took me awhile to find my old bearings again, but I soon headed to the neighborhood where I had once lived. My old hotel had been remodeled into an upscale residence, the cracked murals and broken chandeliers gone. Walking past my old café and up to Callao Avenue, it all looked exactly the same, a wide busy avenue lined with dingy shops selling furniture, cheap clothes, light fixtures. I began looking for the shop. I don't know what I hoped for, eight years had passed, but the little camera, unused and waiting on that street for fifty years, had propelled me on a voyage, and I so wanted to tell the shopkeeper. It took hours of walking back and forth until I found the spot where I thought the shop had been. The man in the store next door confirmed it, the shop had closed, the Russian man was dead. I stood in front of the



The memory of Somalia. Fear of God, fear of men, fear of death. But the love of grandma kept me alive, her name was Cudbi [cotton flower].

LUNA, SOMALI



Amazigh yesterday, Amazigh today,
Amazigh tomorrow. Amazigh in school.

LARBI, AMAZIGH (ALGERIA)

abandoned storefront for a long time, and then walked on. In my bag, I felt the camera.
It was now mine, only mine, it had been waiting for me all along.

Buenos Aires yielded very little, the inhabitants of the city, the *Porteños,* are a beautifully complex and suspicious people. Looking for exiles to photograph I reached many dead ends, and was becoming a burden to my host. So, following the promise of several contacts in the north, I boarded an all night luxury bus and made the long journey to Salta. Away from the metropolis, the atmosphere was more relaxed, the pace slower. The owner of my hotel was kind and obliging. After a day of rest, I began phoning my contacts and making appointments. Salta was more easygoing, but also secretive. Closely associated with the *Montonero* guerrilla movement during Argentina's brutal civil war of the 1970's, the Dirty War, it was a city with many hidden scars. As I began to have meetings in the lobby of my hotel with various people who turned out to be on opposite sides of the political spectrum, the hotel owner became increasingly glum.

After a few days of meetings and phone calls, the work began. I first photographed Osvaldo, a beautiful elderly anthropologist, a native Andean who's mother was a Quechua and father an Aymara. Osvaldo began his adult life as a novitiate in the Catholic Church studying Greek, Latin and Hebrew. But after a crisis of faith he turned back to his ancestral roots and had devoted his life to the study of Andean mysticism and Quechua, a language almost lost to him during the Spanish-only schooling of his youth. Osvaldo's gentle intense view of the world, one which looked back longingly to the days of the Incas, uplifted and comforted me, and it does still.

Shelia and Andrew, in contrast, were abrasive Anglo- Saxon colonials, exiles from the vanished country of Rhodesia living on a farm on the outskirts of Salta.
When I contacted them, they were very suspicious, very reticent, but finally agreed to my visit. They were not evil people, but products of an evil system that had carved up much of Africa and delivered it into the hands of white colonial rule. And when the

I lay my hand on my heart as I bid my only one farewell.

SAM, ARABIC (EGYPT)

All that I have here, in my head,and here, in my chest, and here, in my stomach, this must I say.

OSVALDO, QUECHUA (ARGENTINA)

Zimbabwean war of independence finally deprived them of their beloved country, they ended up penniless in Argentina, the only country that would take them in. On the surface, and perhaps on the inside as well, Shelia and Andrew exhibited every cliché of racist colonialism; their weapons, their animal skins, their photograph of grandfather in his pith helmet and khaki suit, their open hatred for "black Africans." But they also understood the bitter irony of their situation — understood, even if they could not accept, the reason their world had come to an end. They had a disarming way of laughing at themselves, showing that even the vilest system can produce humanity.

It was Shelia who put me in contact with Mariano, an indigenous elder and Anglican priest, dying of cancer in Salta's provincial hospital. Meeting Mariano was to be an experience I would never fully recover from, or outgrow. Sometime in his early adulthood, after training as a healer in the *Wichi-Mataco* religion,
Mariano was converted to Christianity by Anglican missionaries. These missionaries, ironically, are part of the same Anglo community which today owns much of the rich farmland surrounding Salta once owned by the *Wichi-Matacos*, native to that region. The *Wichi-Matacos* now live in barren impoverished villages, crouched in the foothills of the Andes with little or nothing to survive on. "I was a witch," he said, "and my ancestors before me were all witches, but now I am a Christian." It was impossible not to feel cynical about his situation.
Slowly dying of esophageal cancer, he was 56 years- old and his devoted 20 year-old son had been sleeping on the floor of the hospital for weeks. I had been told that Mariano was extremely ill and in horrible pain at all times. When I met him I was struck by the sight of him fully dressed in street clothes, lying on his hospital bed, his shirt neatly tucked in, his hair carefully slicked back. He seemed young and trim and very strong, and it was only when we stepped into the sunlit corridor that I saw his skin was a frightening gray.

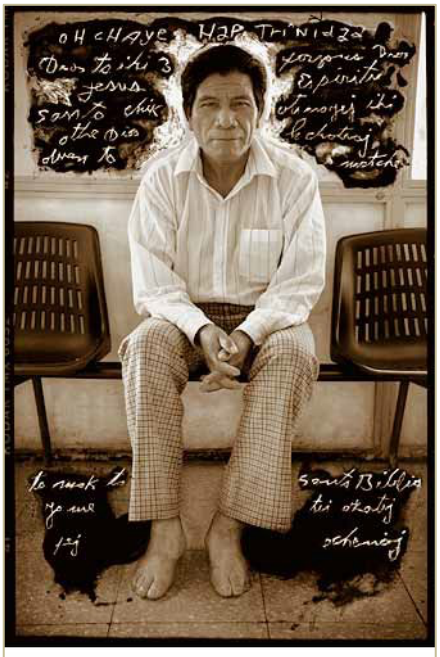
For everything there is a reason.

I am going home tomorrow.

SHELIA AND ANDREW, ENGLISH/SHONA (ZIMBABWE)

We sat in the corridor and talked. The conversation was simple, both of us speaking an unfamiliar language. We spoke mostly about religion,

Christianity, he was a priest after all. I told him I was Jewish and that made a great impression. He reached out and touched my shoulder with great reverence, making me feel for an instant that I was the one with magical power, not him. And then we made the picture — he was like stone, his gaze so firm and absolute, I felt like a fool taking readings with my digital light meter. There was very little to do, I simply opened the shutter and let the power of the man etch itself onto the film. Afterwards, when I requested the handwritten phrase in his native language that would blend with the photograph, he wrote what I have since called a benediction. It was also a spell and maybe a curse, a challenge to the foreign religion and methods of healing in which he had placed his faith. Those words, written in shaky pen onto the back of my tourist visa, have lived with me and tormented me ever since.



Ibelieve in God, in the Trinity: God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. If I have a sickness in my body, I ask for the help of God, and I see that all that the bible says, it does. I have tried it and see the results of what has happened to me.

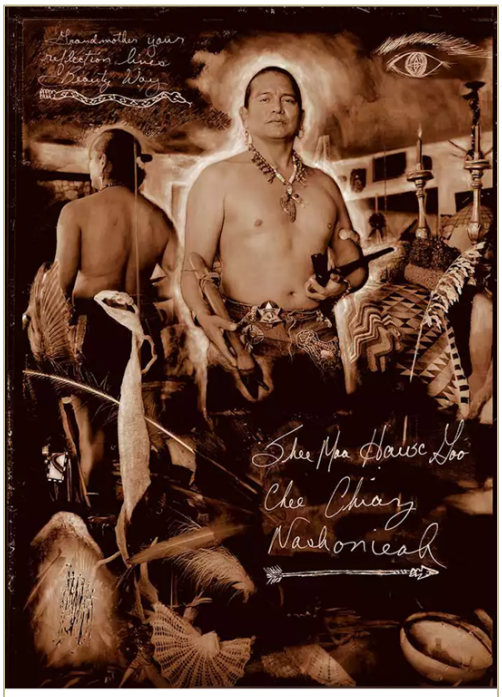
MARIANO,
WICHI-MATACO (ARGENTINA)

When I left the hospital, something had happened. Something had changed in and around me. I was afraid; afraid of his illness, afraid of the magical power he exuded. And then, everything began to go wrong. The hotel proprietor refused to even speak to me. Several appointments I made were cancelled. In one case I arrived for a session, and a frightened maid opened the door, asked me to wait outside and never returned, ignoring my persistent knocking. I was only vaguely aware that several of the people I had contacted were suspected of being collaborators during the Dirty War, and others were still political agitators. Mariano, considered "good" because he was a priest, had introduced me to another *Wichi-Mataco* who was not considered good at all, she was political and also on the government payroll. I became convinced I was being followed, certain I was in danger. Once, thousands had disappeared in Argentina. Perhaps I would become one of them. And the spiritual impact of meeting Mariano, and the benediction he had given me, was beginning to weigh heavily.

Late afternoon, across the plaza on the steps of the cathedral a limping beggar was asking for money, smiling, bowing sheepishly. Shocked, I realized it was Mariano's son. He had been so proud and erect in the hospital, so lovingly attentive to his father. Now, seeing him I had a terrible realization of the paradox of my meeting with Mariano. Perhaps he expected something of me I could never possibly deliver. If I was the one with the power, what spiritual deliverance had he hoped I could offer? The world had begun to turn upside down. I was scared, at the edge of panic, not knowing where to turn or who to trust. Then I had an inexplicable idea. I rushed out of the plaza in search of a telephone book. Fumbling through the pages, I looked for a synagogue, there must be one. Salta was a large city. There were many Jews in Argentina. Not finding it, I searched for the word "temple" and found a listing,

Templo de Salta. I called the number, it was a Jehovah's Witness temple, but I asked, and they kindly gave me the address of the place I was looking for. It wasn't far, hidden, perhaps on purpose, down a back street. A small gold plaque at the gate read *Colectividad Hebraica.*

The grandson of a cantor, descendent of generations of orthodox Hasidim, part of two generations who had turned away from the religion, I had been in a temple only once in my life. I rang the bell. A caretaker answered, "there is no one here, the service is not until Saturday." "I am Jewish, from America," I said, "may I see the temple?" She smiled, hesitating, "okay, come with me." Inside, a courtyard, much larger and grander than I expected surrounded by several buildings. She led me to one and pushed open ornate carved doors. "You can go in, but I won't, it's not my religion." I stepped into the cool dimness. There, alone, sitting in the half lit room, velvet on the walls, silver decoration on the altar, I felt the fear and panic melting away. It was not supernatural comfort, but a connection, a tribute to my ancestors. I was able to breathe again. I stayed ten minutes, then wrote a short note of thanks, walked quietly across the courtyard and let myself out of the gate. I was calm, recovered, I felt irrationally safe. The next day, I took the last two portraits, then I packed up and headed back to Buenos Aires for the flight home.



Grandmother, your reflection lives Beauty Way.
Chiaz, Dineh (Navaho) USA

Seven weeks later, back in New York, I received a letter from Shelia, the first of several she was to send: *Dear Yuri, Just a quick note to let you know that Mariano, the Anglican priest you photographed in hospital, died on Friday. It was unfortunately, a long, agonizing process in which his esophagus and stomach were both removed beforehand. His family would really appreciate one of the photos you took of him especially his son who attended his father better than anyone has ever seen. If you don't have his address please send it care of me and I will see that the family gets it. Best Regards, Shelia.*

Over the years, I have continued to feel either cursed or blessed by Mariano. But just as I connected with my Jewish ancestors during that moment of doubt, Mariano and I also connected, and a small part of him flowed into me, a great privilege. It was not until I met and photographed Chiaz, another indigenous wise
man living his own strange exile in a condominium tower in Miami Beach, that I finally let go of my lingering fear of Mariano. When I told Chiaz the story, he smiled deeply, reassuring me. He helped me realize it was all connected, all one thing — Dinah and my grandmother, the Russian storekeeper, the camera, Shelia and Andrew, Mariano, all the other people I had photographed. And that by encountering my own state of exile that day in Salta, I had become less an observer and more a participant in the story I was trying to tell.