This Is Not Iran; This Is Argentina Jacqueline Saper

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I recently escaped Chicago's cold winter by traveling to sunny Buenos Aires. It was summer there, and the city was in full bloom. There was no shortage of places to see, things to do, and foods to try. Our tour agenda included visits to several notable landmarks and cultural attractions, such as the mausoleum of the beloved First Lady Eva Peron, a tango dance showcase, and wonderful places to enjoy the great local cuisine. Getting around this gem of a metropolis was a relatively easy task, as the city is famous for its wide boulevards. In fact, Avenida 9 de Julio (July 9 Avenue), honoring Argentina's Independence Day, is the widest avenue in the world. This is a city, I found, where soccer players are revered as gods, and the bustling nightlife begins at 10:00 p.m.

I was in Latin America, and I was thoroughly enjoying the cultural immersion. What I didn't expect was to see symbols of my homeland, Iran, so prominently embedded in Argentine architecture and incorporated in public monuments. On the third day of our tour, on a visit to the Japanese Garden, I was at the crossroads of Figueroa Alcorta Avenue and Sarmiento Avenue when I came upon an immense replica of one of the columns of the Palaces of Persepolis. How could this be? I thought to myself. This is not Iran; this is Argentina.

I had come to know Persepolis on a personal level years earlier. During the 1980s, I spent eight unforgettable and eventful years in the Southern city of Shiraz, the capital city of the Fars province in Iran. On many occasions, my family, friends, and I, would take the half hour drive to Persepolis (Takht-e Jamshid in Persian) and marvel at the majestic ruins of palaces that were once the center of the formidable Persian Empire. The grand structures featured intricately designed columns with an ox with two heads at the top symbolizing strength. The back of the oxen supported the roof of the magnificent audience hall that was known as the Apadana.

The column on the side of the boulevard in Buenos Aires made a great resemblance to columns of the Apadana. Named merely as "The Persian Temple Column," the nineteen-meter-high (62.5 feet) pillar was highlighted by two ox heads facing opposite sides, paying homage to the glory of the past Persian Empire. Simply put, the column certainly stuck out amongst the regal Spanish/European style monuments and architecture for which this jewel of a city is known.

A few steps away, there was a decorative image of the Persian Lion, a symbol of the pre-revolutionary monarchy of Iran of my childhood. The lion, made of pale green, cream, tan, and turquoise ceramics, was showcased on a low retaining wall. On the ground in front lay a plaque with the imprint "Leon Persa, Autor Blas S. Gurrieri," which commemorated the Italian-Argentina artist who created the lion.
After questioning the locals and our guide, I learned that the striking column was a gift of the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and the Queen Farah Diba, to the people of Argentina during their visit to the city in 1965.

I was growing up in Tehran at the time that the column was built, which was an idyllic time for Iran. Although this was the era of rapid modernization and progress, it was also a time of reverence for and pride in the glory of the country's imperial past. In October of 1971, at the age of ten, I witnessed the five-day celebration that paid homage to twenty-five-hundred years of monarchy in Iran. The festivities served to link our king, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, to Persia's first King Cyrus the Great, and highlight both monarchs' ethos of respect for cultural diversity.

In pre-revolutionary Iran, the two countries of Iran and Argentina had an amicable relationship and the goal of building a promising future. This is the reason why there is a large square in northern Tehran named “Argentine Square” (*Maydan-e Arjantin*), which is home to a collection of businesses, bus terminals, and shopping areas. After the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979, which overthrew the Shah, the two nations initially maintained their diplomatic alliance. However, following the 1994 bombing of the Association Mutual Israelita Argentina in Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires Jewish community center) which killed eighty-five people, relations between the two countries have been strained. The bombing remains an open case and is a cause of tension between the two countries.

Though times have changed, the Shah’s homage to the glory of ancient Persia a few decades ago still stands tall in a Latin American city in a world apart from Iran. “The Persian Temple Column,” serves as a reminder of a time when governments promoted cultural exchanges and revered another’s nation’s history.

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