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Assault on Paradise

The First Terrorist Attack in the Americas
Marcos Aguinis

English Translation by Dolores M. Koch

World English Rights offered through Straus Literary
Previously published in Spanish as Asalto al Paraíso (Planeta 2003).

The first major terrorist attack on the American continent was neither the World Trade Center bombing of 1993 nor the devastation in New York and Washington in 2001, but occurred at the extreme end of the hemisphere, in the beautiful city of Buenos Aires.

In 1992, a suicide bomber destroyed the Israeli Embassy, killing 29 and wounding more than 200. Two years later there was another bombing, of an Argentine-Jewish community center, that killed 85 and wounded more than 300—the deadliest single attack against a Jewish target since World War II, and the deadliest ever in Argentina.

It is believed that Hezbollah was behind the bombings, with backing from Iran. It is also believed that some within the Argentinean government accepted millions to block the investigation, and may have even had foreknowledge of the attacks. The case drags on to this day: In August of 2005, one of the judges involved in the trial was impeached and in November the identity of one of the bombers came to light—his martyrdom is memorialized on a plaque in southern Lebanon. However, not one of the perpetrators has yet been convicted and the plot remains unsolved.

These catastrophic events form the backdrop for bestselling author Marcos Aguinis' gripping journalistic novel. The story opens with the embassy bombing and a young TV journalist, Cristina Tíbori, sent to report on the scene. Amid the chaos, she comes upon the imam Zacharias Najaf, who stands lamenting the damage that is done in the name of Islam. He tells Cristina that those who do violence in the name of Allah have not truly understood the Koran, and of his concern that this attack is only the beginning. When Najaf sees a hand beneath the wreckage, Cristina and her film crew rush over to help and her horror is compounded when she discovers the lifeless body of her own sister, who had happened to be near the embassy when the bomb exploded.

In the aftermath of the attack, it becomes clear to Cristina that powerful forces are at work to obscure the evidence and obstruct the investigation, and she resolves to use her own weapon of undercover journalism to bring the perpetrators to justice and prevent another attack. Risking her career, and her life, she dives into the complex and corrupt web of Argentine power, where neo-fascists still lurk in the intelligence agencies and international bribery reaches to the upper echelons.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah commandos begin arriving secretly in Buenos Aires, called out of hiding from sleeper cells around the world, and a plot against another target begins to take shape. Through the memories of one of the terrorists, Dawud Habbif, we hear a story of unthinkable suffering and displacement from his native Palestine, and we begin to see inside the mind of a martyr, to learn what might make a person willing to sacrifice his life for a religious cause. Dawud contemplates the paradise he has been promised as he prepares himself for the fateful moment of his assault.

Aguinis' novel is a fascinating read that begins to fill the egregious holes in our knowledge of these events, in part through research and little known historical fact and in part through imagination. It is a critical work in this present moment, when the pattern of international terrorism that first spilled out of the Middle East and into Buenos Aires has begun to affect the lives of nearly everyone. Though he is well known as a Jewish intellectual, this work is a balanced look at the intolerance and hatred that has infiltrated society under the guise of religion and impacts people in every corner of the globe.

Review of Spanish edition in *Publishing Trends* (February 2003)

With the world reeling from the 1994 bombings of the Israeli embassy and the Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Association in Buenos Aires, a Moslem scholar and a young and impulsive journalist join forces to prevent future attacks in Argentine author Marcos Aguinis' latest and perhaps most controversial novel, *Assault on Paradise*. Using actual testimony from a *New York Times* report suggesting that the Iranian government organized and carried out the bombings — and then paid Argentina's president at the time, Carlos Saúl Menem, \$10 million to cover it up — Aguinis, one-time recipient of the Planeta Prize of Spain, rakes through the rubble in a bid to denounce those responsible, and to castigate those who covered up the heinous crime. Among the ruins of the former embassy, scholar Zacharias preaches a radically different view of Islam from fundamentalism, as journalist Tíbori discovers that one of the victims of the blast is her own sister. Then there's Dawud, a suicide bomber who is welcomed with open arms by Hassem Tabbani at the Iranian Embassy (the only character in the book representing a historical figure), and whose flashbacks to a tragic childhood in Beirut explain the historical conditions under which his worldview was forged. Aguinis' even-handed treatment of characters on both sides of the struggle is noteworthy, according to critics, while "terrible facts are brilliantly fictionalized with psychological depth."

Marcos Aguinis is one of Argentina's best-known living writers. He is the author of twenty-four books, including novels, essay collections, biographies and short story collections. There are only a handful of Latin American authors whose books sell more than Aguinis' (such as Garcia Marquez and Vargas Llosa). His novel *La Cruz Invertida* (The Inverted Cross) has sold over 1 Million copies worldwide. His historical novel, *La Gesta del Marrano* (The Saga of a Marrano),

has sold over 600,000. *Assault on Paradise* was released in Spanish as *Asalto al Paraíso* by Planeta Publishing in 2003 and has already sold over 40,000 copies in Argentina alone, spent weeks on Latin American bestseller lists, and been favorably reviewed throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Each of his recent books has become an international bestseller, but *Assault on Paradise* is the first translation to be offered for English language publication.

Aguinis was born in Córdoba, Argentina in 1935, the son of Jewish immigrants. He was seven years old when the news came that the Nazis had killed his grandfather and the rest of his family that had remained in Europe. He describes this as the foundational moment of his life, and one that ultimately drove him to write in an effort to close that wound, to repair the “broken mechanism of humanity”.

Throughout his life, he has journeyed through several professions and artistic pursuits. He studied as a concert pianist, and practiced for years first as a neurosurgeon, and then as a psychoanalyst.

When democracy was restored in 1983, at the end of Argentina’s seven year long “Dirty War” Marcos Aguinis was designated Vice-secretary and, eventually, Secretary of Culture; in this capacity, he sponsored the renowned "cultural renaissance" that flourished in the country at the time.

Aguinis is a recipient of the Planeta Award, numerous literary prizes in Spain, Argentina and throughout Latin America, and has been named a Knight of Arts and Letters by the French Minister of Culture. He lives in Buenos Aires and lectures around the world, but is spending this year as a writer in residence and visiting professor at American University in Washington, DC.

More info at www.aguinis.net

Dolores M. Koch is a leading translator of Spanish literature. Born in Cuba, she holds a Ph.D. in Latin American Literature and has translated such works as *The Doorman* and *Before Night Falls*, by Reinaldo Arenas, *The Angel of Galilea*, by Laura Restrepo, and *Castro’s Daughter*, by Alina Fernández Revuelta. She lives in New York City.