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# One Single Countless Death:

*An Interview with Nora Strejilevich*

*by Mónica Szurmuk*

**I**n one of the few lighthearted chapters of her autobiographical testimonial novel *Una sola muerte numerosa/One Single Countless Death*, Nora Strejilevich recounts an interview with a therapist in Canada. Nora speaks nonstop about her experiences as one of the “disappeared” in Argentina in the late 1970s, her imprisonment in a concentration camp where both she and her brother Gerardo were tortured, Gerardo’s death, the deaths of her parents, exile and the aftermath of terror.

When she stops to catch her breath, Nora realizes the therapist is crying. In English she consoles him, "Don't cry, doctor, it's not that bad." We, as readers, are as taken aback by the gesture as the therapist. Nora, the survivor, provides empathy and understanding. Part of the drive behind Nora Strejilevich's work both as a writer and as a researcher lies in that capacity to empathize, to bear testimony to a horrible past and yet have the strength to imagine a better future. A future that rests on a continued memory of the traumatic past.

Nora Strejilevich was a university student when she was kidnapped by the military in Argentina in 1976. After her release she left Argentina and since then, has lived in Israel, Canada and the U.S. She returns to Argentina very frequently and has close contacts with human rights organizations in the country such as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. She got a Ph.D. in Latin American literature from the University of British Columbia and has devoted most of her work to the exploration of state violence and its consequences in Latin America, Nazi Germany, and more recently South Africa. Nora has published scholarly articles as well as fiction in journals in the Americas and Israel. Her novel *Una sola muerte numerosa/One Single Countless Death* received the Letras de Oro Award in 1997 and will be published in translation by the University of Virginia Press. She is also the founder and director of the International Survivor Narrative Archive.

*One Single Countless Death* is an autobiographical account of Nora's experience but also a collection of other voices, the voices of survivors and their families. The text provides a rich array of narratives which give testimony to the horror of state terrorism and show how sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia were intertwined in the ideology of national security to which the U.S.-trained military forces in South America adhered. If the training of the cadres of the Latin American military in the School of the Americas during the 1960's and 1970's promoted the repression of Communism in the region, Nora Strejilevich shows us how the battle was fought on the feminized bodies of teachers and doctors, workers and stu-

dents, pregnant women and newborn babies. The weapons of choice were torture and disappearance.

What follows are an interview with Nora Strejilevich and excerpts from the forthcoming book translated by Cristina de la Torre.

**Mónica:** How did you start writing?

**Nora:** The question itself is difficult to understand because it requires me to mark a key moment, the seed of what will become fruit. And I don't see myself in terms of seeds and fruit but rather as explosions. In the field of the artistic, which for me also includes drawing and theater, writing became my medium when I was left without interlocutors, an outsider, floating between languages and cultures. In exile. Letters became staples for me. My letters were very long, especially those for my parents who had been orphaned of children since I was in exile and my brother had disappeared. Around that time, '77 or '78, I started producing poetry although I had never been a big reader of poetry and I don't consider myself a poet. Maybe it was my way of extracting sense out of words since the meanings words had before had been lost. Poetry allowed me to draw with words, play in a world which at that point was absurd and meaningless. Chance took me to Canada where I did a Ph.D. in Latin American literature although I never thought I would formally study literature. Literature was the only life possible for me after the deluge. Literature for me until then had been what I wrote or read because I was passionate about it and not because it was part of a curriculum. I started my Ph.D. for survival, without thinking that it was there where I would find an incentive to keep writing what I really wanted to write. I took a class on autobiography where a professor offered us the option to write an autobiographical essay instead of a research paper. For me it was an open-sesame. I started telling what I remembered and never stopped.

**M:** How did you leave Argentina?

**N:** In a hurry, as if an earthquake had taken place. I had to run away without the possibil-

ity of looking back at the ruins that remain. The history behind why and how I started thinking about leaving is too long. As a matter of fact, I was about to leave for a year in Israel when the military burst into my house. My suitcase was ready when they came in. They ransacked my house and my plan to leave was shattered. In a matter of seconds I stopped having a name, I became a letter, a number, nothing, a *desaparecida*. When they let me go, a few days had passed, less than a week, and I had already become what they call a survivor and my family had been destroyed.

M: In what ways does your experience as a survivor of state terrorism define you as an activist, a woman, a Jew, a feminist, a writer?

N: I was already a feminist when I was a child and I refused to do anything in my house if my brother did not do the other half. Of course, state terrorism helped me to better define my convictions. We know that state terrorism is a project carried out by men determined to prove that they have balls, that they can give order to chaos, that they are the owners of truth, reason, power. Military discourse articulates the desire of male domination over a feminized population. There is still a lot which has not been said about the specific ways in which women were tortured in our country, although the subject of children born in captivity and kidnapped by the military has brought many aspects of the experience of women in concentration camps in Argentina to light. I suppose that in my case, having suffered repression first-hand in a very brutal way deepened my commitment to activism.

My interest in anti-Semitism and my own understanding of myself as a Jewish woman came from the very moment I was kidnapped. They told me “dirty Jew. We’ll make soap with you.” Part of my interrogation started with questions such as “Who’s going to train you in Israel?” and finished with “First we’ll finish with the *Montoneros*, then we’ll finish with the Jews.” For me it was a quick training in identity.

M: How do you articulate the connections



between state violence in Argentina and in Nazi Germany?

N: Our military copied the idea of *Night and Fog*, the decree of December of 1941 whereby prisoners transported from the occupied territories to Germany would “vanish in the night and fog.” In her recent book, *Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*, Margarite Leifowitz, gives that title—“Night and Fog”—to one chapter. It was decided that victims would disappear in the most absolute of silences and that the systematic lie—the denial of the massacre—would be articulated in public while genocide was carried out. The experience of the Holocaust and of the Argentinean genocide left similar marks on the general population: people have to deal with guilt, especially because many of them cooperated.

M: How did the archive of repression in South America come about?

N: I founded the International Survivor Narrative Archive (ISNA) to record in text, video, and computer-format interviews with survivors of violent systems. Connecting these formats on the web will provide maximum access and render the narratives in ways that teach us how violent systems permeate

and structure the survivor's present life and affect the life of his or her community now and into the future. Each interview will also be stored in its community of origin, and in Charlottesville, VA at the University of Virginia.

This project is the outgrowth of my previous fieldwork collecting oral testimonies for my book, *One Single Countless Death*. To date, my four partners and I, constituted as Archivo Testimonial Argentino, have recorded one hundred and seventy hours of interviews and will have one hundred more by the end of the year. After periods of generalized repression in which people's voices are silenced, oral survivor testimonies come to the surface. These narratives give us exact dimensions of each tragedy. We want to preserve these testimonies as a crucial part of the effort to overcome our government's attempt to disappear the past and absolve those responsible for the tortures and murders. We want to deny rationality claims to those who conceive and organize massive killings and let everyone know that there will always be resistance to impunity from consequences. We hope that the dissemination of this information will put pressure on governments everywhere not to allow the perpetrators of crimes against humanity to go free. We believe that one actively has to resist the temptation to

forget, the temptation not to speak out and not to hear, not only because it is the ethical way, but because the past horror permeates the present.

M: What kind of response to the forthcoming publication of *One Single Countless Death* do you expect and hope for, from readers in the U.S?

N: The investigation on the "Condor Operation" (the coordinated system of repression in the Southern Cone countries during the seventies) which Judge Garzón is currently carrying out in Spain; as well as the heated debate over the incarceration of former Chilean President Augusto Pinochet (and the Pope's appeal for his liberation based on humanitarian reasons) are an ideal backdrop for the publication of my novel in English. At the same time, my novel, since it is not centered on denunciation but rather on the personal experience of state violence, responds to the endless task of rewriting human experience, in this case one of the traumatic collective experiences that have marked our century. Any reader, therefore, even if ignorant of the history of our countries, can become engaged and involved in the reading of my novel. That's what it's all about.