

CRIME AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

NO. 30

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Argentina, an imaginary country. A place where imagination has been murdered and bodies have gone up in smoke. No one can find them. "It's all in your mind," the generals said. "People haven't disappeared, they left the country, they're quarreling amongst themselves, they don't want to see you, that's why you don't see them. You're imagining things."

The truth was, reality in Argentina in 1977 lacked the boundaries that even the imagination must have in order to project images that are acceptable to the human senses. The reality of thousands of political prisoners being hacked to pieces, burned, or skinned alive went beyond some madman's hellish dream.

On March 24, 1976, the Argentine Joint Chiefs of Staff overthrew the Isabel Perón government in what they proudly termed "a bloodless coup." There was to be no bloodshed. The ostensible purpose of the coup was to wipe out the rampant corruption in the Perón government and to put Argentina back on track. The fact that corruption was the *modus operandi* for Isabelita's cabinets and cronies no one would contest. The economy was indeed in shambles, yet under the military junta, national industry was literally wiped out, causing unemployment to soar; inflation ran at an annual rate of 1,000%, consumer prices rose 255,000% under the military's auspices, and the foreign debt quintupled — from \$8 billion to \$40 billion. In an ironic twist, as part of their disgraced descent from power in 1983, the generals would develop a strategy of allaying public discontent by seeking to have a few hundred low-level military personnel denounced and punished to atone for postwar economic corruption.

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But a bloodless coup it was not. By the end of 1977, there were officially 9,000-10,000 disappeared, many of them children. Others, including human rights activists and Mauricio Schoijet, whose article "The Timerman Affair, Argentina, and the United States" describes the anti-Semitic drive within this pogrom, place the number of victims at 30,000 (see *Crime and Social Justice* 20: 26 [1983]). Nora Strejilevich's account of her descent into the dungeons of the Argentine military's "dirty war" and her almost whimsical survival are a microcosm of the Argentina of that time. Kidnapped on July 17, 1977, she was held in a concentration camp called "Club Atlético," which was closed in 1978. She was released after four or five days, but her brother and his girl friend, who were held in the same camp, were apparently killed there.

The Argentine Armed Forces declared that it was necessary for them to engage in a dirty war against subversion, communism, and foreign ideologies which threatened the Argentine way of life. It needed to be dirty in order to maximize its effectiveness. It was a fight against a shadowy, evil, plotting enemy, and thus any tactic was justified.

The language of this holy war, carried out by self-proclaimed saviors of the fatherland, masked not only the systematic assassination of the political opposition, but also killings by member of the security forces who acted for financial reasons or personal vengeance against people with no apparent links to the guerrillas. Ultimately, this climate of unrestrained violence engendered kidnapping-for-ransom networks in Argentina (within the federal police) and in El Salvador (within the National Guard intelligence unit).

The "patriotic" crusade also served to mask violations of the national sovereignty of Latin and Central American countries. In 1980, the Argentine military dictatorship used this language to justify its masterminding of the right-wing military coup that succeeded in preventing the accession of the newly elected civilian government in Bolivia. Asserting that the civilian government would "promote ideas contrary to our way of life and the permanence of military governments," Argentine President Jorge Videla provided backing for a coup by Bolivian military officers who were major participants in the drug traffic and close allies of organized crime. In Buenos Aires, a computerized list of potential opponents was prepared, and these individuals were imprisoned, exiled, tortured, and, in a few days after the coup, murdered by "security forces" trained by Argentine advisers (see *The Real Terror Network* by Edward S. Herman, 1982: 80-81).

The Argentine Army also sent teams to El Salvador to assist right-wing military and intelligence officers in the running of death squads, which since 1980 have assassinated 60,000 members of the left and centrist political opposition. Further, in a period in which the U.S. government was prevented from doing so, the Argentine defense forces provided Honduras-based contra ter-

rorist units with aid and training for their attacks against sovereign Nicaragua in exchange for other forms of aid from the U.S. to Argentina.

Similar violence perpetrated directly against the Argentine people by the military forces between 1976 and 1983 literally tore the country apart. The newly elected civilian government of Raúl Alfonsín, leader of the Radical Civic Union, faced an unprecedented dilemma in 1983: to become the first government in Latin America to prosecute the military for human rights violations as promised in the elections, or to suffer the loss of its own legitimacy for failure to do so. For its part, the military dictatorship anticipated an outpouring of popular antipathy and decreed a law absolving itself of responsibility for acts committed during the dirty war. Civilian politicians, however, vowed to ignore the law and the courts declared it "legally nonexistent."

Subsequently, two major trials were held in which civilian authorities began to settle accounts with top-level military and police officials who had planned and implemented the state-terrorist campaign. In December 1985, five of the nine members of the three juntas that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983 were convicted by civilian judges for human rights violations. Among those receiving life sentences for terrorizing dissidents were ex-President Jorge Rafael Videla and a one-time navy chief, Admiral Emilio Massera. These convictions were upheld by the Argentine Supreme Court.

In December 1986, the former police chief of Buenos Aires Province, General Ramón Camps, was convicted and sentenced to 25 years in prison for torturing newspaper editor Jacobo Timerman, whom he had accused — with a paranoia typical of Argentina's John Birch Society style anti-Semitic right-wing — of a Jewish-terrorist plot to take over Argentina. The police chief who succeeded Camps and another top police official were also convicted on torture charges, as were a police corporal and the police doctor, who was accused of evaluating the endurance of torture victims so as to prevent their deaths "before it was time." In this verdict, the appeals court rejected arguments that police officials had merely followed orders, and concluded that guilt of atrocities extended far down the chain of command. At the top, of course, was the army, which directed the federal police during the military period.

These convictions and rulings are considered by many to be important milestones in the process of bringing the state terrorist structure to justice. This is especially so if they are contrasted with the actions of the elected civilian government in Uruguay, where President Julio María Sanguinetti granted amnesty to the armed forces and police for the crimes committed during 12 years of repressive rule; with those of the civilian Guatemalan government under President Vinicio Cerezo, which complied with the insistence of the Guatemalan military-security apparatus not to seek prosecution for similar crimes as a condition for holding elections; and with those of José

Napoleón Duarte's government in El Salvador, where under the guise of complying with the Arias Peace Plan, the National Assembly approved an amnesty that prohibits the investigation or prosecution of any member of the military or death squads suspected of taking part in massacres of civilians.

In contemporary Argentina, however, it appears that a critical limit to this process has also been reached as the Right and the military have unleashed a powerful backlash. Against the massive protests of human rights activists, in January 1987 President Alfonsín signed a law requiring a 60-day statute of limitations on the bringing of new indictments against members of the military regimes suspected of torturing, kidnapping, or participating in the disappearances.

Despite this cutoff, 400 additional civilian complaints were lodged, a step which triggered a revolt by sectors of the Argentine military in April. An army major — who had just been cashiered for refusing to obey a civilian court subpoena to answer charges for human rights abuses — and a lieutenant colonel led a mutiny of officers and soldiers against the elected government. They demanded amnesty for all accused officers and the sacking of the Army Chief of Staff who supported the trials. The Easter revolt was countered by the Alfonsín government by calling for a defense of democracy over dictatorship. Over one million supporters rallied to the call, and labor leaders, human rights activists, and the civilian political establishment packed the Congress. With this display of popular support and Alfonsín's personal intervention, the mutiny was aborted.

Although that battle was won, the war was lost: the Chief of Staff resigned; the Argentine Supreme Court suspended the trial of 19 naval officers charged with atrocities, stating that it would consider the argument that the defendants were merely following orders; and President Alfonsín proposed a law to end the prosecution of lower-ranking officers on the same grounds. This "due obedience" law, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in July 1987, granted immunity to 200 military officers accused of human rights abuses and left only about 50 Argentines subject to prosecution for the crimes committed during the dirty war.

Relatives of the victims, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, and the federal prosecutor who tried the case against the junta have condemned the "due obedience" law and this general course of events. President Alfonsín's pragmatic attempt to put the dirty war to rest has not augured well with those who believe that justice cannot be served unless all the disappeared have been accounted for and their abductors and torturers prosecuted. Although the commission created by President Alfonsín in 1983 estimated the number of the disappeared to be 9,000 persons, the final count is still coming in as mass graves continue to be discovered. The memory of these victims will not be easily extinguished as Argentines exiled around the world painfully begin the

journey back, be it physically or by use of their imaginations, as Nora Strejilevich has done in contributing to our understanding of the effects of institutionalized lawlessness. May we dare to imagine that this will never happen again?

Terror in Argentina

It's cold. The cold comes through the walls, passes through the bed frame, comes through the mattress, and enters my spine. It plays with it, vertebra by vertebra, comes and goes, up and down, pushing me to the point of exhaustion.

Through a crack in my cell comes a beam that cuts the stagnant air. It clashes against my body and I see streams of red sweat.

I am a beast paralyzed before the slaughter house: my limbs, trapped in a net of bruises, try to overcome their immobility. My hands shake and fall like dead weights. My head rises and drops flat. My feet bend, but a metal yoke on my ankles stops them.

Pain shouts from my legs to my brain. It reminds me that I am confined in a dungeon. I no longer have the name I had in the outside world. I have a code for identification. I am letter and number: K 148, the label of this pulsating inert thing. I can't forget the code they gave me when I got here or they will kill me.

How did I get here? Somebody brought me.... Yes, some thugs took me away from home, forced me into a car....

July 16, 1977, 2:00 P.M. The so-called Joint Command bursts into our apartment. The voice of my mother is a trembling question: "Why are you coming here like this?" The house quickly becomes an armed camp. It's a raid. They must be searching for my brother. While the cold from the floor moves forward through my nose, my breasts flatten against it. I feel the weight of the machine gun against my scalp.

Noise in the study: they look for books. They don't stop in Gerardo's room. They check my luggage, my ticket to Israel. They turn my drawers upside down. Why are they paying so much attention to my stuff?

"Come here, we have to arrange some things with you, baby."

My flesh turns to fear when they carry me towards the door. They are taking me away. I shout. No hope. An iron hand on my shoulders moves me from my world. An alien world is being imposed against my will. The street is a springboard into the void. I don't want to make the leap. They force me into the car. I resist. I shout my name while I kick violently. I push. I fight against my future, petrified in a collective grave. The friction of the seat against my cheek anticipates the friction of the ground against a frozen skin.... If it were only that. The worst are the blows, these now, those to come. "We're going to let you have it...we'll make soap out of you, Jewish shit."

No hope. The absurd wins and exiles me from life, forever. I imagine the waves of the Atlantic, the lakes of the south, the plane that takes off without me. No more planes for me.

They leave me in a room, blindfolded. They undress me and they fasten my hands and feet to a horizontal slab. They ask me questions that I don't understand. They discharge electricity along the point of a cable that drills my brain, my teeth, my ears, my breasts, my ovaries, all the pores of my skin. I am driven crazy...and now upside down, they want to know if I like it from behind and they speak of abuse and they laugh while an electric knife cuts my buttocks and I shout...but I control myself. I won't give these sons-of-bitches the satisfaction of my crying.

The iron hands are very many: they are electrified fingers that discharge their voltage of hatred on my skull, my mouth, my hands. The pleasure of torture is like a dance that brings their lust to a bleeding climax.

The don't get a word from me. They throw me in a corner. They grant me the choice: if I confess, I'll save my life.

My mind is blank. Confess? Imbeciles. As soon as I say a word, they will leave me stiffer than a board. Confess what?

"You are going to kill me, you *are* killing me!"

A certainty makes me straighten my back: it's Gerardo's voice. No. I'm losing my reason. I don't want to go mad. Not that.

"I don't know anything, you're killing me!"

It is him, some hands take me back to the slab. They are discussing my scar. "They both have the same scar," they say. It's a mark that we both have. Yes, they've got him.

I don't have to think. My mind is white noise. Pain runs in my veins. I'm not even thinking of death.

The discharges shake me with an increased voltage.

"Speak!"

Now, even less than before.... If my testimony contradicts his, both of us are dead. And if his is stubborn silence, better. Anyway, they know everything. They are tired of asking and so, they answer: that I lived in Avellaneda with Alberto and had a printing press, that such and such a person is sending me to Israel, that his office is located in such and such a place....

But they aren't satisfied with that. They want to know more. My wounds scream silently for pity. I bite my tongue not to scream. The discharges are now so fast, so persistent, that I no longer think I'm going to die: I am dying. I want to finish dying. But no. They stop and I am alive. They untie me and carry me along corridors that seem sewers, up to a cubicle with a mattress, without covers and almost without air, with distant voices that sound like one single voice of pain.

It is cold. What's that noise? Chains hauling....

"Stand up!" (I cannot.)

"Up!" (I have to.)

"K 148, reaaa-dy?"

"Yes, Sir."

"If you open one eye you'll lose both. Understand?"

"Answer!"

"Yes, Sir."

They lead me and the other prisoners to the holes where we'll shit. There's no toilet paper. We return to the other hole. The hands of one on the shoulders of the other. A centipede going back to the pit. Inside. To the bottom.

The mouth of my cell opens day after day and brings forth my meal like a hot tongue. Soup is my clock, the one that points out my sunrises and sunsets. After the third or fourth I lose track and I get lost in my own calendar, without mornings or afternoons: a constant night plunges me into the penumbra of half-sleep, half-vigil. I wake up one day, when they come for me.

Instead of the torture chamber, I am carried to an infirmary where my wounds are treated. I take advantage of this pseudo-liberty to tell the nurse that I'm innocent, to ask him if I will be released, to tell him again that I don't know anything.

Darkness swallows me again until my door opens — this time without the hot tongue of my breakfasts and dinners. It stands open and silent, as if beckoning me out. I don't hear any steps. I sense noises coming from the other end of the corridor. They're sweeping the floor. They won't come here. An impulse moves my fingers and I have already dropped the blindfold to my cheeks. I see, on the other side of the corridor, somebody sitting on his bed, his eyes also uncovered. He is thin, pale, redheaded, young.

I talk to him, muffling my words, speaking under my breath. He listens. He tells me that he has been there for a year and a half, that in this section they hold the ones they consider dangerous, that almost nobody is released, that some are transferred to other concentration camps, that only a few are taken upstairs, where they sit for a night and are released afterwards.

I don't want to think that I have a chance to come out alive. He also says that with Jews the rules are harder. I have no illusions. The laws of absurdity want my life to go on like a plant in a winter garden. Can I stand it?

A prisoner calls a guard. He wants to defecate but it can't be allowed outside of scheduled time. He can't resist. He'll shit. He'll be beaten until he turns mad and tries to kill himself or be killed.

I cannot lose my temper. An instinct for survival makes me challenge the torpor of my limbs with exercise. My despair is consoled with landscapes that I project on my eyelids.

I want to forget my brother's screams. I don't want to think and I don't. I fall asleep. I am awakened by a voice calling K 148. The door opens and I recognize the voice of the nurse who treated me.

He asks me if it is true that I don't know anything. He asks me to tell the truth in order to be saved. The truth is I don't know anything.

He leads me upstairs. I am sitting on the floor. The voices around me, the noise of typing, the shouts of "Sergeant," "Private," "Sir," make me feel that I am in a headquarters of the police or the army. I am overcome by the presentiment that I am close to freedom, although I try not to think about it. Better to avoid thought; but being still, my brain works.

I am cold. I ask to do exercise in place. They allow me. I concentrate on the rhythmical movements and forget the laughter of the unknown men who watch me swinging like a blind rooster, shaking the chains that fasten me to their cavern.

After a while they call me to an office, by my name and surname. "We are very sorry, this has been a mistake.... We want to warn you that you were never here, you don't know and haven't seen anything." (I haven't been through the *picana* [cattle prod], I don't know that they are killing my brother, I didn't see the cells or that prisoner.) "Because if not, there can be unnecessary complications with your family." (I don't know that they kidnapped my cousins, that one had been killed.) "So, move carefully and everything will be O.K."

I am already outdoors, my hands on the wall, over my head. They check me, as if I could hide a weapon. They put me in a jeep with other prisoners and the motor starts.

They can still kill me, throw me in a ditch with a bullet in the temple. I wouldn't be the first one.

They release the first prisoner: they order him to count to 100 before taking the blindfold off. They go away without shooting. The same scene happens two, three, four more times. It is my turn. I finish counting and I watch the wheels rush away. It is night. I walk along the sidewalk of the neighborhood that I know. I recognize the river and the Italian restaurants. It is La Boca. I run into one of them and I ask for a telephone. I check the time. It is 2:00 A.M. A voice answers, half asleep. My mother. I tell her that I'll be back soon and hang up. I don't want anybody to overhear. I ask for change for the bus fare. I was robbed, I say. I don't care if they believe me or not. I escape the brightness of the lights, the noise of the music, the drunk voices of midnight.

I go to the bus stop where I will catch the bus that will bring me back home. It all seems like a fantasy. I am back, I repeat to myself, but I don't understand it. It might be a fraud, a trick to confine me later in a situation many times more wretched.

The bus stops. I get in. I wait for it to start going. From my seat I see a police car approaching. I don't feel anything: neither fear nor disappointment. I smile thinking: "I told you that they would come to take you again. At least you didn't swallow the pill of freedom."

They arrive. They get in.

"Identification, please."

"I don't have any."

"Don't you know that you can't go without it?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Come with us, Miss."

A car drives me to the police station. Without blindfolds or beatings. I don't speak. They could be checking up on me. My scars probably tell the truth, but I ignore them and I swear that nothing happened to me. I don't have anything to declare.

They call home. I am afraid that my mother will say too much, but she doesn't. She says she's been waiting for me.

Under threat of future punishment, they release me. I go home. At the door, four open arms greet me.

It takes me a while before I can get used to the succession of day and night, to voices that don't shout, to the sky, to the freedom of my muscles.

But I cannot get over the feeling that a pair of eyes is fixed to the back of my neck. I feel they're spying on me, following my movements. I believe they are going to give the final blow after checking out my friends. They will kill me. I decide to take the plane I missed only one week ago.

From the small window of the jet, Argentina is now an outline, a shadow among the clouds, an imaginary country.