

INTRODUCTION

This book is about the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, a courageous group of women in Argentina who have worked tirelessly to find their disappeared grandchildren and to achieve a measure of justice in their country for more than twenty years. The book is also about the countless human rights violations that the military inflicted on the Argentine people between 1976 and 1983 and how this group of women resisted the worst dictatorship in Argentine history.

Under the military regime's reign of terror, even mild dissent was equated with subversion. All "subversives" were seen as enemies of the state, enemies who needed to be eliminated. In addition, the military believed that the children of subversives should not be allowed to grow up with the families that had produced their parents. They needed to be with "decent" and "patriotic" families, who would save them from becoming the next generation of subversives. These are the children that the Grandmothers are searching for—children who were born in captivity in the more than 340 concentration camps where their pregnant mothers were detained and killed after delivering them, as well as children who were kidnapped and disappeared with their parents.

I first learned about the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in 1986 when, after responding to a fund-raising letter from the Argentine Information Service Center (AISC) in New York, I received a book about them, *Botín de Guerra*, by Eduardo Nosiglia. I remember looking with amazement at the gray and black cover, which showed a burned baby carriage and what looked like the remains of a building

after an explosion. I wondered what the book was about. I was shocked by what I read.

I had known for many years about the repression in Argentina, and I knew that if I had been living there during the military regime I might have disappeared myself. During the years of the dictatorship, every time I went to Argentina I had to go to the federal police to renew my passport (when Argentine citizens living abroad entered the country, their passports automatically expired). These visits to the police always made me nervous—and for good reason. In similar situations, Argentine friends of mine had been held and interrogated, sometimes for hours; and a scientist whom I had met while working at MIT, Antonio Missetich, had disappeared after returning to Argentina.

I knew about the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo who marched every Thursday at 3:30 P.M. and about the moral leadership they had provided for so many years both during and after the dictatorship, but I had been unaware of the existence of the Grandmothers. It was hard to believe that during the “dirty war” (as the military themselves called the repression) children had become targets, that newborn babies were given away to families who were part of the repressive regime, and that hundreds of children were growing up with false histories and identities.

When AISC called to ask if I would accompany two Grandmothers during their visit to the Boston area, I was delighted to do so. María Isabel Chorobik de Mariani, known as “Chicha” to her friends, and Nélica Gómez de Navajas, the president and the treasurer of the Association, were in the United States for a tour sponsored by Amnesty International that included visits to colleges, universities, churches, and human rights organizations. As I translated their stories for English-speaking audiences, I began to realize the multilayered nature of their work and the complexities of their task. I was very moved to learn that some of the found children had long been suspicious about their origins and that after their initial shock about the truth they rapidly integrated themselves into their legitimate families. I heard about the arguments over the restitution of the children: Would the restitution constitute a second trauma? Would it not be better to leave the children with the people they knew as parents, regardless of the role of those “parents” during the repression? And I heard about the delays of the judicial system that enabled the children to be taken abroad so that their kidnapers could escape justice. I understood the urgency of the Grandmothers’ work. Each day that went by was one more day in which the

children were growing up with lies and without their histories, deepening the fraudulent socialization to which they were subjected.

As I heard about the many facets of the Grandmothers' work, I was intrigued by the richness of their stories and decided that I wanted to learn more about them. After that visit, every time I went to Buenos Aires to see family and friends I visited the Grandmothers' office. Back in the States I kept in touch by reading their newsletter and occasional news updates. My own work on reproductive technologies had led me to consider issues of identity and personal history and to take part in a larger discussion in the feminist community about the rights of children, identity, and the various definitions of what constitutes a family; I saw many points of connection with their work.

I decided to tell the Grandmothers' story because I wanted to pass on to others what I had been learning from them. In spite of the pain and terror that had been part of their lives, these women radiated an irresistible and contagious positive energy. Their inspiring courage in the face of danger challenged my own stereotypes about women and aging. In 1993, during a sabbatical from my teaching responsibilities and in the spirit of "bearing witness," I wrote to the Grandmothers about doing a book on them. I explained that I wanted the opportunity to present their work to the English-speaking public. The reply was swift and positive. Yes, they would give me the names and addresses of grandmothers who identified themselves as members of the group and any other information that would be useful to the project. I sent a detailed description of the project to twenty women: three declined to be interviewed, but later another three joined in. Each of the twenty Grandmothers I interviewed expressed their desire to go on record with their comments rather than be anonymous.

Most of the interviews took place at the Grandmothers' office in Buenos Aires, in a neighborhood close to the Jewish business section of town. The office stands in front a huge abandoned market, a ghost building. The neighborhood is also known for having once been home to the legendary Carlos Gardel, Argentina's most famous singer. Going up to the fourth floor in the elevator—an elaborate and sinister-looking wrought-iron cage built in the beginning of the century—was an unsettling experience. I often felt a knot in my stomach as I anticipated the dark hall outside the office and then, once the office door opened, the big display with pictures of hundreds of disappeared children and their parents. Posters, international awards, paintings, and photographs on the themes of children and human rights made the mission of the group

immediately clear. The Grandmothers' office is a vibrant place: the telephone is constantly ringing, conversations are animated, and visitors from other parts of the country are common. Relatives of the disappeared children stop to inquire about the status of the searches. I had the privilege of attending six of the weekly planning meetings of the Association, at which active members discuss the latest news about each case and scrutinize the political developments on the national scene that may affect their work.

The interviews lasted from one and a half to three hours. I collected demographic information for each Grandmother regarding her age, family situation, class background, and the events that led her to become involved in the group. An interview guide helped start the conversation. In most cases, after one or two leading questions, the guide was put aside and I simply listened to what they wanted to tell me. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed either by me, by people suggested by the Grandmothers, or by trusted friends and supporters of the human rights movement. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Spanish are mine. Though I have usually quoted the interviews verbatim, in some cases I condensed the accounts slightly. I also interviewed other people related to the Grandmothers' work: relatives, psychologists, lawyers, the director of the National Genetic Data Bank, forensic anthropologists, human rights activists, and three of the found children.

In December 1993 and again in 1994 I attended the end-of-the-year party held at the Grandmothers' office. I was touched to see some of the found children (now teenagers or young adults) with their legitimate families, chatting with their friends and totally at ease with all who were present. The pride and pleasure of the Grandmothers in being with them was obvious. Since most of the Grandmothers have not yet been able to identify their grandchildren, those who have been found are very special to them. The presence of these children reminds them of their successes, reassures them that their work is not a hopeless dream, and gives them confidence that other children will also be found. The youngsters seemed very much aware of that role as they moved among the various Grandmothers, asking about their work and their families, reflecting the intimate knowledge and bonds that exist among them.

During a trip to Argentina in October–November 1996, my last visit before finishing this book, the unexpected happened. Within forty-eight hours of my arrival my sister informed me that a relative, Reina Waisberg, wanted to talk with me. I had met Reina briefly in my youth (one

of her sisters is married to my only living uncle). Over the telephone, Reina said that she had heard about the book I was writing through her work with the Grandmothers' Association. When we met she told me about the disappearances in 1976 of her son Ricardo and his companion, Valeria Belaustegui Herrera, two months pregnant at the time. My family was stunned to learn of Reina's activism; they knew about the disappearance of her son but did not know that his companion was pregnant when she disappeared and that Reina was looking for her grandchild. When I mentioned my connection to Reina to one of the Grandmothers, however, she was not surprised, commenting, "That is why we say that there is no family that has not been touched by what happened here, one way or the other." It was a phrase I had heard several times since I started working on the book, but this time it hit home. Visiting with Reina and her granddaughter Tania (who was fifteen months old when her parents disappeared) was one of the highlights of my trip, and I was particularly happy when they agreed to be interviewed. It brought home how deeply entrenched in Argentina is the conspiracy of silence to which the Grandmothers so often allude, and I felt more determined than ever to help spread the word about the crimes of the dictatorship and the resistance of the Grandmothers.

As I started to work on the book memories of my own childhood reawakened. During the 1940s one of my mother's sisters, Matilde Cordevero, who was living in France, had vanished. From half-heard telephone conversations between my mother and her siblings, I gathered that she had been sent to a concentration camp. We never heard anything else about her. I decided to start my own search for information about her fate. Thanks to the work of Serge Klarsfeld on the deportation of Jews in France, I learned that Matilde had been taken to Auschwitz on March 7, 1944, in a convoy with 1,501 other people and that she had perished there. When I told this to my aunt Daisy, her only surviving sister, she thanked me for giving her the "good news," as she called it. While I had never personally met my aunt, her presence had lingered in the family and there was an inexplicable sense of relief as we finally learned what had happened to her. This experience reinforced my belief in the healing potential of the work of the Grandmothers and the need to establish the truth regarding the fate of their children and grandchildren.

Because kidnapping children and changing their identities are not crimes covered by the amnesty laws and pardons given by the constitu-

tional governments that followed the dictatorship, the work of the Grandmothers has unique significance. The Grandmothers want the past to be remembered and speak often about the importance of collective memory. However, their focus is on the future. They believe that for a *true* national reconciliation to take place, those guilty of atrocities must admit their crimes and accept punishment. Only then will Argentine society have a chance to become fertile ground on which a true democracy may flourish. I join in their belief and I hope that this book will, in some small measure, contribute to their success by increasing the public support and understanding of their work.

For an update on the work of the Grandmothers, please email the author at ardittir@aol.com.