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“We Are Militants and Victims of State Terrorism”: Resistance and Reparations in the  
Association of Former Political Prisoners of Córdoba, Argentina

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Anthropology

by

Rebekah Su Park

2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“We Are Militants and Victims of State Terrorism”:

Resistance and Reparations in the  
Association of Former Political Prisoners of Córdoba, Argentina

by

Rebekah Su Park

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Carole Browner, Chair

Using Argentine former political prisoners as a case study to contribute to the larger field of transitional justice studies, this research addresses three key debates: What is the end goal of transitional justice? Should post-conflict societies recall memories of past violence? Does human rights leave behind those previously involved in popular (and armed) struggles? To answer these questions, I explain the marginalized status of former political prisoners, investigate the impacts of social and economic discrimination caused by stigmas attached to imprisonment, and analyze the unique role political prisoners play in memorialization efforts.

This study is based on 21 months of fieldwork in 2006, 2008, and 2009, conducted in Buenos Aires and in Córdoba with members of the Asociación de Ex Presos Políticos de

Córdoba (AEPPC), who were once disappeared and illegally imprisoned for belonging to labor unions, leftist movements, and guerrilla organizations during the last military dictatorship (1976-1983). My methods included: participant observation, 39 interviews with political prisoners, five expert interviews, and archival research.

My findings reveal that Córdobaese political prisoners faced discrimination by relatives of *desaparecidos* (disappeared victims), who are the backbone of the Argentine human rights movement, for having survived while others remained missing. Political prisoners were also marginalized because the general public held them responsible for the violence that ensued in the 1970s. The overall effects of social and economic marginalization prevented political prisoners from acquiring jobs that would have allowed them to save for retirement, and therefore have left many survivors in dire economic situations. As a result, Córdobaese political prisoners organized in response to economic and health problems, and have since also played an important role in memorialization efforts, where they are able to circulate memories of solidarity and resistance. Political prisoners do not speak about torture nor do they seek healing, but instead view memory work as a form of political activism.

I argue that in the case of Argentina former political prisoners, the goal of transitional justice is to receive financial compensation for being victimized by the state and to have a major role in the construction of collective memories of the past. Remembering the past is seen as an act of agency, rather than of reviving trauma. Finally, when families of the disappeared adopted a human rights framework, they also portrayed disappeared victims as apolitical—which effectively excluded political prisoners. Since the era of popular struggles and revolutions, political prisoners have also incorporated human rights into their revived political agendas.

The dissertation of Rebekah Su Park is approved.

Suzanne E. Slyomovics

Christopher J. Throop

Geoffrey Robinson

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2012

I dedicate this dissertation to the Asociación de Ex Presos Políticos de Córdoba,  
and especially those who have passed away since I left Argentina in 2009.  
May my *compañeros* find their ultimate justice in the rising of the *pueblo*.

Atilio Basso, 1954 - 2010

Victor Ferraro, 1950 - 2011

Luis Acosta, 1951 - 2011

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## Glossary

**Abuelas.** Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. The Abuelas are a group of grandmothers searching for missing grandchildren who were stolen from their disappeared mothers and given away to military families and their supporters under false adoption papers. The Abuelas estimate that the military stole approximately 500 babies. In 2011, the Abuelas identified one more missing grandchild. They have now successfully identified 105 stolen children.

**AEDD.** Asociación de Ex Detenidos Desaparecidos. This group of survivors is located in Buenos Aires. They are not considered to be a part of the national network of former political prisoners.

**Alfonsín.** Raúl Alfonsín was democratically elected in 1983 after the fall of the last military dictatorship. It was under Alfonsín's tenure when Argentina held a truth commission in 1983-1984 and trials against military junta leaders in 1985.

**Archivo.** Comisión Provincial de la Memoria y Archivo Provincial de la Memoria. This archive is also called "D2" and once operated as the center of police intelligence in the 1970s and during the last military dictatorship (1976-1983). D2 served as a secret prison where kidnapped victims were tortured and interrogated before being released or sent to a secret concentration camp.  
Asociación Madres    Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo

**AEPPC.** Asociación de Ex Presos Políticos de Córdoba. This group of former political prisoners was the first to gain legal status in Argentina in February 2007.

**Asociación Madres.** (see Madres) After the Madres de Plaza de Mayo split into two organizations, one branch, the Association of Madres, became the more radical one and adopted the politics of their disappeared children. The Association Madres have become involved in various social and economic struggles, including constructing public housing and a university. These Madres are not interested in memory-related projects or in searching for the exhumed bodies of the disappeared, and are instead dedicated to political struggles.

**Caerse.** "To fall." This is the word political prisoners used to describe when they were kidnapped by the military; they "fell into the hands of the military."

**Cana.** The slang word for prison.

**Cantar.** Literally translated as "to sing" in English, but referred to prisoners who gave up information while being tortured. Giving away names meant a prisoner was "singing."

**CCDs.** Campos Clandestinos de Detención or Clandestine Detention Centers where disappeared victims were tortured and killed.

**Compañero.** The name in which political prisoners refer to each other, and is loosely translated to "comrade" or "companion." This term comes out of the Peronist movement.

**CONADEP.** Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, or the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared. CONADEP was Argentina's truth commission that formed in 1983 and published its report *Nunca Más* in 1984.

**Cristina.** President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was elected to office in December 10, 2007. She is the widow of former President Néstor Kirchner. Both of them have supported human rights in Argentina.

**D2.** The former center of police intelligence in Córdoba that was also used as a secret clandestine center to torture and interrogate disappeared victims during the last military dictatorship (1976-1983), but it was also used as a torture center before 1976. It is currently a memorialized site and the location of the Provincial Commission and Archive of Memory in Córdoba.

**Desaparecidos.** The disappeared victims abducted, tortured, and killed by the military dictatorship with help from the police, the Catholic Church, oligarchy, and other conservative professionals.

**ERP.** Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo or the People's Revolutionary Army. This was one of the main guerilla group of armed revolutionaries. It was the radical arm of the Revolutionary Worker's Party (PRT).

**ESMA.** Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada or the Navy Mechanics School. ESMA operated as a CCD throughout the entire military dictatorship in 1976-1983 and is the place in which all other CCDs are measured against because of its brutal torture tactics and low survival rate.

**Ex presos.** This is the shorthand term for ex presos políticos, or former political prisoners. The former political prisoners often refer to each other or themselves as "ex presos" because of its brevity.

**Familiares.** Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas, or Families of Those Disappeared and Imprisoned for Political Reasons. This group formed in 1976 before the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and includes siblings, spouses, parents, and other relatives.

**H.I.J.O.S.** Hijos por la Identidad, la Justicia, contra el Olvido y el Silencio, or Children for Identity and Justice, Against Forgetting and Silence. HIJOS formed during Menem's presidency, which was known as the era of impunity, in Córdoba and La Plata in 1995. They are known for their protests outside of the homes of known former military officials responsible for the deaths of disappeared victims. These protests are known as *escraches*. One of their slogans is "when there is no justice, there is escrache."

**Kirchner.** Néstor Kirchner was the former Argentine President from 2003 to 2007. Advances in human rights are widely attributed to Kirchner. During his tenure, trials against former military officials resumed, former sites of CCDs became Spaces for Memory, offices of human rights opened up in every province, and political prisoners organized for the first time in 2007.

**La Perla.** One of largest CCDs in Argentina located in the Córdoba Province where victims were tortured and kept before being killed or transferred to another CCD. Approximately 2200 victims were killed at La Perla.

**Madres.** Madres de Plaza de Mayo. The Mothers of May Plaza that marched in front of the presidential palace in protest in 1977. The term Madres refers to all mothers of the disappeared.

**Madres LF.** Madres Línea Fundadora. After the split of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo into two groups, the Madres LF focused on finding their disappeared children's bodies, involving themselves in memorial projects, and demanding justice. They are seen as the less radical branch of the two Madres groups.

**Menem.** Carlos Menem was president in Argentina from 1989 to 1999. Menem granted presidential pardons and prohibited further trials against military officials in the name of national reconciliation. Menem also established financial reparation laws in the 1990s for families of the disappeared and those imprisoned arbitrarily.

**Milico.** Derogatory slang to refer to the military.

**Montoneros.** The leftist armed branch of the Peronist Party. This was the most important and largest opposition group.

**PC.** Partido Comunista or Communist Party. The military dictatorship alleged fought against Communism, but most of the disappeared were not Communist.

**PEN.** Poder Ejecutivo Nacional or the National Executive. Some political prisoners were arrested and held under PEN.

**Picana.** The electric prod that was used to electrocute prisoners as the primary form of torture.

**Preso comun.** Common prisoners were “regular” prisoners who are distinguished from political prisoners. During the dictatorship, common prisoners were known to have aided the political prisoners. Stories include common prisoners teaching political prisoners sign language, transmitting messages to the outside through their family visits or upon their release, and selling various goods like sugar and cigarettes to the political prisoners.

**PRT.** Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores. The Workers' Revolutionary Party was a Marxist-Leninist political organization in Argentina.

**La Ribera.** A prison in Córdoba, also used as a secret detention center.

**Unidad 9 La Plata.** A prison in La Plata used to detain male political prisoners.

**UP1.** Prison Unit 1 was a regular prison located in Córdoba that was taken over by the military after the start of the dictatorship in 1976. Separate pavilions were devoted to political prisoners

who were treated differently than the common prisoners. Women and men were also kept on separate floors.

**Villa Devoto.** A prison in Buenos Aires province used to detain female political prisoners.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

When Americans think of the 1960s and 1970s, they are as likely to think about Woodstock as they are to remember conscientious objectors. The social movements that took hold in the United States were also taking root around the world. In Latin America, revolutionary social movements that included Marxists, Communists, Trotskyites, Third World Movement Catholic workers, labor union members, and students were growing in numbers. Music, film, and fashion reflected the burgeoning youth counter-culture, which was experimental, explicit, and critical. Within the context of the Cold War, however, Latin America became an ideological battleground for the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Following the CIA-aided coups in Brazil in 1965 and Chile in 1973, the Argentine military—with tacit support from the U.S.—overthrew then President Isabel Perón, General Juan Domingo Perón’s third wife, on March 24, 1976. The military promptly suspended the country’s constitution and announced the start of a National Reorganization Process, known as the *Proceso*, to bring order and security to the country. The military alleged that a “Communist cancer” was infecting the country, and immediately went about labeling all those involved (or suspected of being involved) in labor unions, guerrilla organizations, and leftist social movements as internal enemies. Nothing less than the removal of these so-called Communists could save the country, and to accomplish this task, the military spent the next seven years fighting what they termed a “dirty war,” using unconventional tactics that were, the military said, required if they wished to defeat this enemy, and simply “excesses” that came with war.

When the military first took power, the public generally welcomed them (Sikkink 2012:61). Transferring power between civilian governments and military dictatorships was a

common occurrence throughout Argentina’s history. In the 1970s Argentina was experiencing financial trouble, protests, and general civil unrest—including armed confrontations and bombings—among right wing and left wing groups (see Robben 2005a). But although the country had long been familiar with dictatorial rule in the past, the tactics employed by the military during the so-called dirty war—disappearing 30,000<sup>1</sup> people considered to be “subversives” and illegally detaining 10,000 political prisoners—were shocking to many Argentines. Those who were killed are known as the *desaparecidos* (disappeared persons); there were no records of their detention or evidence left behind. The military purposely kidnapped, tortured and killed its victims in secret to avoid public uproar that General Augusto Pinochet experienced when the military executed hundreds in Chile, and “disappeared” them to eliminate any physical evidence of their crimes (Keck and Sikkink 1998). The former political prisoners—called *ex presos políticos* in Argentina, or simply “ex presos”<sup>2</sup>—are often identified publicly and by scholars as the *sobrevivientes* (survivors). But those who identify as ex presos view the term “survivors” as too apolitical. The military took political prisoners in exactly the same way as they abducted the disappeared, but then transferred the ex presos to regular prisons—reappearing them as if they just entered the legal system. Some of these prisoners were tried in military tribunals, others were held incommunicado, and still others were detained at the disposition of the National Executive Authority (PEN).

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<sup>1</sup> Conservative estimates suggest the number of disappeared to be around 9,000 whereas human rights groups place it at 30,000 (see Alison Brysk 1994a). According to the Argentine Nacional Comisión on the Disappeared, or CONADEP, the official number was 8,960, though it noted that the actual number was probably higher, and has since been revised to be around 14,000.

<sup>2</sup> When referring to a specific gender, I will use the appropriate form in Spanish: “a” for women, or ex presa, and “o” for men or “ex preso.” When both genders are present, the masculine form dominates (ex presos).

While the military declared they were fighting a “Dirty War” against communism, their attacks targeted a much wider range of people. A subversive was anyone suspected of belonging to any leftist group. I define leftists as people who held socialist and social democratic ideals and stood against various military dictatorships between 1955 and 1983, and were primarily members of the Peronist working class base, a loosely organized collection of socialist or Trotskyite parties with a history of grassroots struggle against imperialism or capitalism. Most of the ex presos I interviewed were involved in one of two revolutionary groups popular in the 1970s and 80s. The main opposition group was the *Montoneros*, the radical branch of the Peronist party). The Montoneros were an armed leftist group that opposed the illegal actions, killings, and torture of civilians by the military, right-wing paramilitary groups, and dictators—all of which had the support of conservative sectors of the Catholic Church and oligarchy. The other armed group was Maoist-inflected, the *Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People’s Revolutionary Army [ERP]). ERP was the armed branch of the Lenin-Trotskyite group, the *Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores*, or Workers’ Revolutionary Party, known as PRT. There were also two smaller armed groups, the Revolutionary Armed Force (FAR), and the People’s Armed Force (FAP). Some of those taken were not part of any formal political organization, and were merely sympathetic to the poor or labor unions. The military also sometimes mistakenly disappeared the wrong person or took someone who was somehow connected to another subversive even though she herself had no political connections. In many ways the category of subversive was limitless and arbitrary—possessing the wrong book, looking like a hippie, or walking without documents all were grounds for disappearance. The guilty by association owes its logic to the principle of contagion (Slyomovics 2008). Medical

metaphors were popular during the Argentine dictatorship. Subversion was a cancer that needed to be excised by any suspect tumors and potential threats.

In Argentina, the primary *victimias* (victims) of the dictatorship are the desaparecidos. But since the desaparecidos are not physically present, in practice, the people who take up that victim status, who claim authority over memorialized spaces, receive financial reparations, and fight for trials are the relatives of the disappeared—mothers (and fathers), children, siblings, and spouses. The relatives are, therefore, also primary victims. These kin-based groups are the primary actors of the Argentine human rights movement, which is often referred to as a singular actor despite the existence of non kin-based human rights groups.<sup>3</sup> Internal differences and diversity of actors also exist within the movement. However, for brevity sake, I will repeatedly refer to “human rights groups” or “the human rights movement” as a way to contrast the political prisoners from other kin-based victim groups of the dictatorship.

All of these above categories—the disappeared, the families of the disappeared, and survivors (of which include political prisoners)—all stand in opposition to the military. In general, the former military officials are referred to as the *represores* (perpetrators)—mostly in the press and by human rights groups—or simply *militares* (military men), but the ex presos often use the pejorative term *milicos*. Although most of the blame is placed on the military, human rights groups and ex presos also blame the civilians who collaborated with the military—judges, businessmen, police, and others who enabled these large-scale operations, without whose help disappearances would not have been possible.

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<sup>3</sup> Other human rights groups include: Permanent Assembly of Human Rights, the Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS), the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights, and the Peace and Justice Service (SERPAJ). These groups were also threatened during the dictatorship, and some of their members were disappeared.

The people I worked with consider themselves survivors but not as *ex desaparecidos-detenidos* (ex-disappeared-detained), as other survivors do in the capital Buenos Aires. As a group, the AEPPC members view themselves as *militantes* (militants), political activists who were imprisoned for political reasons. The ex presos call each other “*compañero*.” There is no direct translation for *compañero* but is often translated to “comrade,” “colleague,” “partner,” or “classmate,” and comes from the Peronist movement. The term *compañeros* lies somewhere between “friend” and “fellow militant.” As one ex preso, Americo Aspitia<sup>4</sup>, put it, “Compañeros are people who march alongside one another in search of social change.” While someone may die for another *compañero*, some distinguish a *compañero* from a friend, because personal intimacy is not required for this kind of political relationship. The fact that the ex presos use the word “*compañero*” suggests another level of camaraderie that goes beyond their identity as survivors. This is a significant fact because the turn toward human rights in the 1970s when the popular struggles for liberation and revolution were deemed failures would marginalize the ex presos for maintaining their affiliation with guerrilla organizations. Later, in the 2000s, when ex presos organized as a group, they would adopt human rights language but retain their “old” identities by *not* calling themselves “ex-desaparecidos” who were depoliticized in human rights campaigns against torture and disappearances.

And yet, because ex presos suffered torture, illegal detainment, and the real possibility of being killed, they also consider themselves as *victimas del terrorismo del estado* (victims of state terrorism). But they want to be considered victims who were also struggling for political change. “*No somos inocente*,” said one political prisoner, “We are not innocent.” Ex presos were not random youth who for no reason were illegally arrested by the military. They were actively

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<sup>4</sup> Americo was imprisoned for four years and 6 months for being a member of *Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores* (Workers Revolutionary Party).



fighting oppression, the multinational companies in support of a more capitalistic market, and the silencing of political opposition by right-wing politicians. The ex presos knew that they were running the risk of being arrested for their political views and activities, but they also do not believe any government is permitted to commit human rights abuses. For this reason they are both militants and victims of state terrorism simultaneously. In the context in which the political prisoners decided to take up arms instead of non-violent protest, it was considered heroic and noble that they were fighting for a social and moral ideal of equality—as exemplified by Che Guevara. Of course, for the military, the presence of armed guerrillas was used to justify torture, kidnappings, and executions. And when human rights became the dominant model to advocate for change (Moyn 2010), previous movements that used violence were deemed immoral and misguided.

This state repression during the last military regime (1976-1983) was a departure from other dictatorships because the military “demonstrated the development of an obvious determination on the part of the state to exterminate its opponents” and did so through a “clandestine practice” (Crenzel 2008:174-5). Task groups composed of military officers, policemen, and civilians were dispatched to kidnap, torture, and detain their targets in one of 610 *campos clandestinos de detención* (clandestine detention centers, or CCDs) throughout the country<sup>5</sup>. Thousands left the country and thousands more went into hiding. The military effectively dismantled guerrilla and leftist movements using terror tactics, disappearances, and torture.

The dictatorship ended in 1983 when the military failed to reclaim the Falklands/Malvinas islands from the British and could not save the plummeting economy.

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<sup>5</sup> To see a map of the locations of the CCDs in Argentina, see [www.memoriaabierta.org.ar](http://www.memoriaabierta.org.ar).

Immediately following the transition to democracy, the newly elected president, Raúl Alfonsín, established a truth commission in 1983 and held a historic trial against the military juntas in 1985. More trials were planned but they were later halted when the military threatened another coup. Since then, succeeding presidents have issued their own transitional justice initiatives including reparations and amnesties. Nearly three decades after the end of the dictatorship, events related to the disappeared—such as the prosecution of those who killed the victims, the identification of exhumed bodies and the discovery of secret torture centers, and the establishments of new memorials—continue to make national and international news.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, even as the human rights actors have made many advances in promoting their cause, the families and supporters of the military continue to portray the military actions as noble and patriotic. For the supporters of the military, the disappeared and the political prisoners were, and continue to be, terrorists who victimized the military and the police in the 1970s (Salvi 2011). Thus, the two opposing sides on the dictatorship continue to remain at odds and seem far from the point of producing shared narratives of the past.

Much has already been written about this last dictatorial period, its methods, manipulation of language, and about the aftermath—the exhumation of bodies, trials, and memorials (Feitlowitz 1998; Robben 2006; Olmo 2002). Many have heard of the heroic *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, the brave mothers who demanded to know the whereabouts of their missing children by openly protesting the dictatorship, and the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, the grandmothers struggling to identify and reunite with their missing grandchildren born in captivity through DNA testing and court orders (Bejerano 2002, Gandsman 2009). Yet,

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/laplaza/2010/12/argentina-videla-menendez-sentenced-life-prison.html> and [http://www.clarin.com/politica/Condenan-represores-Videla-Menendez-perpetua\\_0\\_394760741.html](http://www.clarin.com/politica/Condenan-represores-Videla-Menendez-perpetua_0_394760741.html).

compared to the plethora of research into the relatives of the disappeared, the multiple challenges and histories of the survivors of the last military dictatorship in Argentina have been largely exposed through autobiographies and have only received scant attention from scholars.

This dissertation seeks to fill this missing gap. There has been a long silence around survivors in Argentina because of two separate presumptions of guilt. *Por algo será* (there must have been some reason) they were taken, say members of the general public who either justified the military's actions or wanted to rationalize the events around them as a self-protective measure, because to have been taken, a person had to have been involved politically. That same phrase, *por algo será*, comes back again, in implicit accusations made by members of human rights groups, who say the ex presos must have done something to survive while their *compañeros* did not. Agreement of lack of "innocence" exists but differences remain on what that "guilt" of political activities means for symbolic and material reparations. The silencing of political prisoners, however, is not a full blotting out of history, but rather a restricted containment of when and where they are given space to speak, how they are regarded internally within the human rights movement, and a general disregard for their needs as recovering individuals:

In fact, after the moment of legitimacy and public acceptance during the 1985 trials, a sense of suspicion and distrust started to affect the reception of the voices of survivors. The restricted credibility of their voices involved a clear recognition of their suffering and the acceptance of their description of the conditions of detention camps as "true." Suspicion regarding their own "privileged" conditions was more a suspicion about the silences in their testimony (implying collaboration? Betrayal?) than about their voices (Jelin 2009:193)

Writing about political prisoners is particularly important considering the fact that Argentina is regarded as one of the most exemplary cases of a comprehensive approach to dealing with the

past, and because it demonstrates one of the reasons why the transitional justice process remains an unfinished one even after trials, a truth commission, presidential pardons, and reparations.

This study is based on 21 months of fieldwork in 2006, 2008-2009 in Argentina, and focuses on the *Asociación de Ex Presos Políticos de Córdoba* (Association of Former Political Prisoners of Córdoba [AEPPC]), in the city of Córdoba in Córdoba province. The AEPPC is considered to be the first organization of its kind because it was the first group of self-identified ex presos to obtain, in February 2007, *personería jurídica* (legal status) from the state. In reality, the members had began meeting informally since 2003, and called themselves the Commission of Former Political Prisoners. Prior to the AEPPC, the practicalities of working with former political prisoners—who were geographically dispersed and not gathered within one organization—made conducting a study difficult (Interview LdSC, 6/3/2008). I was the first scholar to work with the AEPPC.

Another reason why there might be less scholarly work on ex presos is one that is sensitive and controversial to write about. Before starting my fieldwork an archivist with the National Security Archives warned me from experiences that tensions existed between the various human rights groups in Argentina and that building ties with one group could potentially mean alienating myself from another. This was certainly the case in my experience as well, though admittedly not for others. After I finished my fieldwork, more than one scholar joked that I had worked with the “traitors.” One said that while the kin-based groups treated survivors cordially and even warmly at trials or other public events, they also spoke about them in negative terms, as traitors and the reason why others remain disappeared. Because of the importance of the kin-based groups, of their suffering and activism, it is understandable why scholars may have stuck close to them, as there was much to learn from the families of the desaparecidos.

While this no longer appears to be the case, the lack of scholarship on ex presos may also be attributed to the fact that, like other human rights groups, it is hard to become a member without initially be regarded with suspicion. The AEPPC, which is theoretically open to any ex preso, is essentially closed to the public. I was the only non-ex preso present at organizational meetings. I was also the only one without Argentine citizenship, and the only one under the age of 50. My entry into the organization was made possible through an ex presa Dr. Irene Martínez, who introduced me to her former fellow prison mate, Sara Waitman. Sara was the president of the AEPPC and her endorsement of my research provided me with credibility that allowed me to stay and observe meetings, even though the general assembly (all of the consistently-attending members) had previously approved my project prior to my arrival. At the first AEPPC meeting, I introduced myself and briefly explained my dissertation research. I explained that I was interested in interviewing them at a later point in time. After speaking, Sara informed them that Dr. Martinez had sent me, and that I was in Córdoba not just as a student but also as someone committed to human rights. Sara's speech was a lesson in how to introduce myself for the remainder of the year. I needed to speak more about my solidarity with their cause and less about the relevant theories I was pursuing in my academic project.

Some members personally welcomed me while a couple expressed doubt as to why I chose Argentina, and not, say, Mexico as the site where I could conduct research for my dissertation. (One particular person believed that the Mexico-U.S. border issues were more appropriate for an American graduate student. Another was unclear as to why I wanted to work with a bunch of old activists: was I the CIA?) I was, after all, from the United States—the country that the majority of the AEPPC members blame for economically supporting and colluding with Argentina's military dictatorship and landed elite to implement conservative

economic policies by literally killing off the political opposition of which the ex presos were a part. Many forms of torture the ex presos suffered were a direct result of the U.S. School of America's training military officials from Argentina on matters related to national security and counter-terrorism. (The Argentine military also copied the tactics used by the French in Algeria.) The ex presos frequently asked about my political views and personal background, and I answered candidly. My background in community activism and knowledge of social movements helped tremendously in facilitating my relationships with the ex presos, because it gave me a measure of legitimacy as well as a common language in which to speak with them.

By attending the historic trial against the Third Army Corps General Luciano Menéndez at the very beginning of the fieldwork in May 2008, I was introduced to most of the AEPPC members, family members of the disappeared, local human rights groups, government workers, and labor leaders. We spent several hours of every day of the trial waiting in the lobby before entering the chambers of the federal courthouse. Because I stayed close to Sara, and her best friend and ex presa, Gladys, (they met in prison) I was able to observe, meet, and listen to people speak about their lives, the trial, their memories, and current activities within the human rights and labor community. The trial brought together old friends and members of all the human rights groups, and the breaks were a chance for people to bring each other up to date. The atmosphere felt like a funeral gathering—wonderful to bring people together but for a terrible reason.

The extent to which I was included in the activities of the AEPPC is best illustrated by the degree to which the members themselves made my presence a priority. During one meeting before a lobbying trip to Buenos Aires, for instance, various members asked if their children could accompany them on the bus transporting ex presos from Córdoba to the capital and back.

The planning committee declined these requests because of the limited space. Afterward, I went to confirm that I was not included only to be told, “Of course you are coming with us!” Aside from the bus driver, I was the only non-ex preso on the bus, and had been given priority over the children of the ex presos.

All of the 39 informants lived in Córdoba. Twenty-two are male, seventeen are female, and they ranged in age from 53 to 75 years old. In terms of education, thirteen had university or technical degrees, five were university students before their detainment but never finished, seven finished secondary school, thirteen finished primary school, and one did not mention his level of education. Four women worked as teachers and one woman as a psychoanalyst; the rest worked in factories or trades, and twenty-four individuals were in labor unions. Thirty-five of the informants are AEPPC members, and among them, thirty-four had been detained at some point between 1970 and 1983—with the exception of one member who was detained in 1957, under a previous dictatorship. The length of imprisonment ranged from one day (in the case of three informants) to ten years. Only one AEPPC member had never been imprisoned; her husband died from brain damage resulting from torture in a secret detention camp, and she gained entry into the AEPPC because of her activism on behalf of ex presos. Included in this study are four ex presos who are not AEPPC members; two of whom are wives of members. The remaining two informants are close friends of one of these wives. While some of the ex presos are considered middle-class, all of the AEPPC members struggle financially.

### **Goals, memory and human rights**

This research contributes to transitional justice studies by addressing some of the major debates, including: What is the end goal of transitional justice? It has been generally assumed

that reconciliation or healing is the main objective for a range of transitional justice initiatives. Neither of these were goals matched by the ex presos. Instead, I write about their pursuit of pensions and roles at memorialized sites of former secret detention camps. Another central question within the field that this work deals with is whether post-conflict societies should recall memories of past violence? During the 1990s, former Argentine President Carlos Menem justified his presidential pardons of those sentenced in 1985 on the grounds that the country needed to move forward and not dwell on the past, and that dropping pursuits of justice would speed up the process of reconciliation. The last question that this research undertakes is whether human rights left behind those previously involved in popular struggles? Most of the ex presos I worked with were part of guerilla or Marxist-influenced organizations, but opposition to the dictatorship emerged from a new paradigm of human rights rather than from revolutionary ideals.

I address these three debates using Argentine former political prisoners as a case study. The central questions that guided my fieldwork were: Why in a country where the human rights movement is so vibrant, were ex presos silenced? How did that silencing impact the overall long-term health of the ex presos? And what, if given the opportunity, would ex presos contribute to memory work in Argentina? By pursuing these specific inquiries, this study explains the formation of the AEPPC and analyzes Argentina's transitional justice process from these survivors' perspectives.

As mentioned earlier, in comparison to other groups victimized by the last military dictatorship, the political prisoners' views on the transitional justice process has not been widely sought out, analyzed, or circulated. This is the case despite the fact that Argentina has had an explosion of memorialization efforts and memory scholarship. And while Antonius Robben



(2006) found that Argentina's constant replay of memories of violence re-traumatizes the society, I found that the diversity of experiences within Argentina's human rights community must be taken into account to assess the times and contexts within which re-traumatization may or may not occur. These former political prisoners are now circulating their memories as an extension of their militant identities and as an affirmation of their survival. Rather than being traumatized, I conclude that they are finding a place for themselves among the human rights movements.

One of the remarkable lessons that comes reading others' work on Argentina's dictatorial and post-dictatorship period is that the timing of their research has profound influences on their findings. As the political leadership and human rights community change, so do our understandings of transitional justice in Argentina and the ways in which different civil society groups and citizens perceive the successes and failures of the state's attempts to address the past in the present. Previous scholars have reflected upon the aftermath of the dictatorship, the development of the broader human rights movement in Argentina in response to the dictatorial violence, and the impacts or failures of various transitional justice efforts. In *The Politics of Human Rights in Argentina* (1994b), Alison Brysk, based on her fieldwork between 1987 and 1989, argues that the social movement composed of grieving families, religious figures, and civil libertarians that arose in opposition to the last military dictatorship became an influential human rights movement because all of these actors were outside of the mainstream political system. Ordinary citizens sought to ensure the rule of law and used symbolic strategies to build collective action. In analyzing the overall impact of the human rights movement, Brysk speculates that the return of military rule is unlikely based on the fact that human rights actors delegitimized the military and eroded its power. However, Brysk also does not believe that the human rights

movement can guarantee a military government from returning to power. At the time Brysk was conducting her research, she perceived a significant decrease in human rights activities and saw the waning influence of the movement's pressure and participation. Although Brysk concluded that the movement was unable to adapt and have generational succession—an accurate reflection of the situation at the time she was conducting her fieldwork that has now since changed—she contends that the protestors gained legitimacy through international human rights groups and legislation, and helped changed the norms and set the political agenda for transitional justice efforts in Argentina.

Writing about Argentina a decade after Brysk, Antonius Robben (2005a) who conducted his fieldwork primarily in 1989 and 1991, with additional trips in 1995, 2000, and 2002, takes a wider historical perspective. Robben traces the beginnings of the dictatorial political violence to 1945 rather than starting with the military coup in 1976. Unlike Brysk, Robben observes that human rights actors, particularly those who have familial ties to the disappeared, have not receded into the background. Instead, they have kept memories of the dictatorial past and of political violence in the public eye so much so that the society as a whole is continually re-traumatized. “The response to social trauma may be a lengthy silence, forgetting, and withdrawal, as in the case of the Holocaust during the 1950s and 1960s, but can also be a compulsive reliving, acting-out, re-experiencing, and repetition, as in the case of Argentina's dirty war”, wrote Robben (2005b:127). According to Robben, the last military dictatorship was simply the apex of the political violence between right-wing and left-wing groups who had between the 1950s and 1970s launched a series of attacks and reprisals on one another. Since then, human rights activists have continually called for justice and truth, which has kept alive the ongoing cycles of trauma and political divisiveness. Robben argues that the creation of

memorials in Argentina and the processes of memorialization have not brought about national reconciliation but have instead emboldened human rights groups to take a more antagonistic position against the military. “Eventually, narration will take the place of experience, even if that narration will reproduce the current antagonism founded on contrary experiences... Thus, the past will become more distant,” predicts Robben, “The violence and trauma which kindled one another for half a century will retreat toward acceptance and reconciliation, and then be extinguished some long-awaited and distant day” (2005A:358-359).

An even more recent overview of the Argentina human rights movement has recently been undertaken by Saskia van Drunen (2010) whose dissertation “Struggling with the Past: The Human Rights Movement and the Politics of Memory in Post-Dictatorship Argentina (1983-2006)” is a historical examination of the official and unofficial attempts to deal with the past and the political struggles behind the construction of collective memory. Van Drunen argues that within the social movement are a diversity of positions that affect the overall political process, particularly the difference between personal and collective identities (2010:298). Van Drunen identifies two major ongoing challenges in Argentina’s memorialization process. The first revolves around how two different groups approach the topic—human rights activists and victims of the repression believe it is their moral duty to remember and they continue to seek legal justice, whereas academics and other professionals working on memorialization view memory work as a part of knowledge production more generally and take a more detached approach in order to extract moral and political lessons (2010:300). The other challenge is determining who has the moral and political authority to speak about the past—these questions over authority have produced tensions between human rights actors, victims, academics, and professionals.

These three investigations trace the historical development of the human rights movement in Argentina, primarily through in-depth interviews with victims of the repression, members of governmental institutions, political activists, and academics. Each scholar also draws upon various documents, such as pamphlets, newspaper articles, and government documents, to contextualize and cross-reference what he or she heard and observed in their participant observation. Though all three investigators traveled around the periphery of the capital to gather additional data, they were based out of Buenos Aires. These investigations also reflect the particular historical moment in which each was conducted.

This study benefits from the historical analyses of these three above-mentioned investigations. Since Brysk's study, human rights groups have become far more integrated into the main political structure. One faction of the well-known human rights groups, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*—the mothers of disappeared victims who were the first to openly protest the dictatorship on April 30, 1977—have a visible and close relationship with the current President Cristina Fernández, as they did with Fernández's late husband and predecessor as president, Nestor Kirchner. In fact, all of the family-based human rights groups have come to work with governmental bureaucratic structures, receiving funds for their activities and gaining legal recognition to advance resolutions in the legislatures. The ex presos, who were once arguably the most removed from the mainstream political system, have also have built a relationship with the local and national governments in order to obtain funding for their organizing. Thus, this study was conducted at a point when human rights groups and other social activists have a closer relationship with the government than in the past because of the bureaucracy of reparation. The development of Argentine human rights movement is also tied to the history of the international human rights movement, which exploded in the 1970s.

Robben's assertion that the constant reliving of the past has brought about more traumatization raises questions around transitional justice efforts, and has caused many to wonder whether memory work enables societies to resolve political tensions. The long-engagement of human rights actors since the fall of the dictatorship makes it even more intriguing that ex presos have not been a visible part of this process. The timing of Van Drunen's work, which notes the shift in actors that took place in 2004, only two years after Robben's work ends, enables her to also speak about the role of former political activists. Noting these actors leads Van Drunen to identify the debates over who has the right to speak and the motivation behind their participation in the creation of collective memories.

This study differs from the above investigations in three important ways. First, this work is focused on ex presos. While Brysk, Robben, and Van Drunen spoke with victims of torture and illegal arrest, their main informants have been relatives of the disappeared, the Madres, Abuelas, Familiares, and HIJOS. Ex presos have not been a visible part of the Argentine human rights movement, and the organization I worked with did not form officially until 2007—after these studies ended; I seek to explain its late formation and significance. The treatment of political prisoners is one way to measure the extent to which norms have changed—from the environment that fostered the conditions that made the repression possible to the beginnings of reparatory programs providing pensions to political prisoners.

Second, this project is not based out of the capital and instead takes place in the interior of the country. Half of the country's population lives in the Buenos Aires province, and the other half is spread across the eleven other provinces of the massive country. Buenos Aires is distinct from the rest of the country because of its size, culture, and economy. While the government and all of the human rights organizations' headquarters are located in Buenos Aires,

much can be gained by understanding how state terrorism operated outside of the capital. On writing about the potential comparisons between micro memory projects in Argentine provinces and the capital, Buenos Aires, where he worked, Vincent Druliolle wrote:

In addition, an analysis of similar practices would probably highlight another complex dynamic, namely, the relationship between memories in the capital and “local” memories, which reminds us that the memory/ies that we tend to call “dominant” and “national” are in fact those we observe in specific locations, very often the capital or urban centers. Da Silva Catela and Mombello show in their analyses of memory struggles in the provinces of Jujuy and Neuquén that “local” memories may be different from, and even clash with, the “dominant” memory in Buenos Aires, as it is seen as erasing or absorbing them. The center/periphery dynamic may thus add more complexity and layers to the construction of memory (2011:18).

I chose to work in Córdoba, the second largest city in Argentina, with a population of 1.5 million. Yet, outside of the capital, the country feels and appears different—an observation made by both inhabitants of the capital and in the provinces, and is also often related to the tensions between the two places. Buenos Aires is the wealthiest part of the country, urbane, cosmopolitan, and highly developed technologically. The majority of the population of Argentina lives in the Buenos Aires province, and because it is also where the government resides, it is also the primary recipients of government funds for culture and business. For example, national memorials for victims of the last military dictatorship are constructed in the capital, ostensibly for all victims, but those living in the provinces do not actually ever see the memorial in person. People born and raised in the capital, the port city, call themselves *porteños* and stereotype themselves as being more European, educated, refined, and urbane than their fellow citizens in the provinces. Conversely, several ex presos in Córdoba told me that they are more connected to the land, and that life in the provinces was slower paced and the people more *humilde* (humble) than those living in Buenos Aires.

Córdoba is an important city in Argentine history because it is seen as the birthplace for the labor and student movements. The military repression was particularly harsh in Córdoba because of the notoriously sadistic Army Corps General Benjamin Luciano Menéndez who was in charge of the military operations that kidnapped, arrested, and tortured suspected subversives in that province. (Different army generals ran different provinces, and the social and political communities differed from region to region.) Even before the start of the last military dictatorship, right-wing, anti-semitic paramilitary groups had already begun to disappear various labor leaders and leftists.

Rather than attempting to cover a wide range of places and organizations, I focus on one particular group in Córdoba. The scale at which I approach this study is at the level of the individual and ethnographic. One of the goals of this investigation is to contribute anthropological insights to the field of transitional justice by providing a local-level perspective and evaluation of transitional justice efforts from the perspective of the individual to complement the macro-level of analysis—which is the viewpoint of most writings on transitional justice (Teitel 2000; Siegel 1998; Nino 1996; Minow 1998). I am particularly interested in the challenge of defining who is and who is not a victim, and how human rights as being above politics shaped victimhood.

### **What Argentine political prisoners teach us about transitional justice**

In observing the present-day struggles of the former political prisoners, listening to their life stories, and tracing the presence and absence of survivors in post-dictatorship Argentina, this research offers several contributions to the field of transitional justice. I first investigated the silence surrounding the survivors to explain not only their lengthy initial absence, but also their

recent emergence as publicly recognized victims. I argue that their identities as political militants made it difficult for them to easily fit into existing kin-based human rights organizations in Argentina. Consequently, ex presos, who have been and continue to be useful as witnesses in trials, have simultaneously had a limited role as witnesses in the construction of collective memory in the post-dictatorship period. However, as memorialization processes become even more important as political vehicles to pressure for more trials, ex presos have increasingly played crucial roles in developing these spaces. I offer some of the survivors' memories of the dictatorship—ones that differ from official narratives of the past. The process over who should memorialize this dark past of Argentina's history and how it should be publicly commemorated is extremely relevant to other societies faced with the task of remembering and forgetting a violent past.

In addition, I discovered that while torture is among the primary human rights abuses that the ex presos faced, many other economic and social impacts negatively impacted the overall lives of the ex presos. The ex presos' experiences after being released from prison reveal how the effects of state violence endure and change over time. My findings also contribute to reparation theory through my critique of what constitutes a human rights abuse and when a violation must occur to receive compensation (Slyomovics 2009, Das 2006).

I tell the story of these ex presos through the prism of agency. Agency is defined here in the general sense: the ability to act independently in the world, even when authorities and structures limit those choices.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, it is about how the ex presos act in prison

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<sup>7</sup> I acknowledge that there is a huge literature on agency in the social sciences, especially on defining it, but for my purposes, I am interested in the concept in as much as it allows me to discuss how ex presos think and speak about their activism as militants. Their desire to *resistir* (to resist) and express *solidaridad* (solidarity) are what I interpret as acts, as being agents.



according to the particular morals prescribed by their political ideologies. The memories they retrieve and tell to others are about constructing identities around their militancy and not about their suffering; in so doing they become willing agents of their past and present. But if agency is central to their identity, it also deprives them of their victim status. As agents, they acted and they were punished for it. Furthermore, if the ex presos had agency, the families of the disappeared are left to wonder: What did they do to survive? Conversely, what did they *not* do to enable others to survive? Such questions assume that the self-representation of the ex presos as individuals with agency is accurate, but regardless of its veracity, the balance between agency and responsibility is where the tension lies. While the silent desaparecidos are presented as innocent victims, the ex presos, by claiming agency, exclude themselves from that group. But if the ex presos are deprived of their will (as prisoners in European concentration camps were during world War II) and if, as Holocaust survivor Primo Levi argued, morality can be suspended in a place where there are no morals, then the ex presos can become victims. As victims, though, they are no longer the militants they see themselves to be. As agents they are responsible for the deaths of their compañeros, according to others.

By speaking about the political prisoners as *militantes*, even as the military fought to strip them of any sense of control or freedom, the ex presos explain how they survived then, and how they survive today—by remembering and continually their *militancia* (militancy). I examine how ex presos expressed *resistencia* (resistance) and *solidaridad* (solidarity) in prison, what might be described as agency and will in anthropology (cf Murphy and Throop 2010). Attempting to retain a sense of their identity as militants, however small and adapted, enabled survival in the

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Beyond that, I leave discussions on agency to other scholars who are far more adept on this subject.

past—psychologically and physically—but this identity or reclaiming of identity as militants deprives ex presos of victim status, not legally but socially, today.

Yet, the reality is that the ex presos were dependent on their captors for food, water, space, light, and air. What the ex presos did, however, was find points of agency amidst this repression. We see also see the limitations of agency again when the ex presos were released. The ex presos could not control the social and economic conditions to which they returned after their release. Their lives had been irrevocably changed and they spent years attempting to recover what they had lost—and ultimately failing to do so because they could neither control how others treated them nor the bureaucracy in place that deprived them of rights given to other victims. Still, as they seek reparations for what they have suffered, they continue to participate in the creation of memorials and memorialized spaces, insisting that they resisted the military and their torturers and by doing so, they pass on memories of themselves as people with agency—however limited.

This story is ultimately about their enduring identities as militants and the moral choices that their commitment to their militancy entailed for better or for worse. My research contributions revolve around rethinking the end goal of transitional justice, reasserting the productiveness and moral value of remembering the past, and demonstrating the ways in which human rights has both limited and benefited victims of torture and imprisonment.

## **Chapter Overview**

This introductory chapter contextualizes the purpose of this research. Even though Argentina has experienced many dictatorships, the latest one historically (1976-1983) used disappearances as strategy to enforce political order. The consequence of this violent tactic led to an enduring human rights movement mainly composed of family members of the disappeared.

For this reason, I offer another book on Argentina's dictatorial period though from the perspective of the silenced political prisoners.

Chapter 2 positions the research questions within existing conversations and debates, primarily in the field of transitional justice, but also in the context of anthropological approaches to human rights. This research contributes to the growing literature on anthropological studies on transitional justice from a local perspective and on an individual level. Anthropological research is particularly useful in explaining what happens when the common assumptions that transitional justice is based upon does not hold in local case studies (Hinton 2011). Specifically, I explain how this research builds upon previous scholarship on transitional justice in Argentina. Throughout this dissertation, I am acutely aware of the various approaches and goals of writing about suffering, and the expectations that we hold from our readers and ourselves as witnesses of others' suffering.

Chapter 3 provides a brief history of the formation of the AEPPC, explaining why ex presos have been discriminated against and why they have become visible in the past decade. The discrimination against them during and after the dictatorship meant that the ex presos were twice victimized—by the state and then by the public.

Following this background, in Chapter 4, I discuss the importance of kin relationships in legitimizing actors in the local human rights community in Argentina. The historical and cultural meanings of the family not only influenced how the dictatorship viewed their war against subversion, but also how human rights actors and ex presos saw the roots of their activism. These family genealogies of resistance explain the conception and structure of the human rights community and how particular voices are highlighted in the various memory-related projects flourishing around the country.

These memorials, monuments, and memorialized spaces all beg the question of whether ex presos should be granted a role in the development of these memory projects as directly affected witnesses. I argue in Chapter 5 that ex presos have not fully been recognized as important figures in the construction of collective memory, and should therefore be highlighted as “moral witnesses” (Margalit 2002).

With the establishment of ex presos as crucial voices in memorialization efforts, I then justify the attention paid to them through their unique stories of resistance and solidarity that are not usually featured in “memorial museums” (museums that commemorate past atrocities as defined by Paul Williams 2007) in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 7, I discuss how the public role of ex presos and their desire for moral and economic reparation should not foreclose the ex presos’ desire to carry on their militancy. In other words, while transitional justice efforts are ostensibly performed in hopes of achieving reconciliation and healing, the ex presos are focused on justice, questioning our assumptions about the purpose of transitional justice.

Our attention toward ex presos, however, is not merely a matter of instrumentality to recall the past and to know what happened at *campos de concentración* (concentration camps), but also as a matter of moral and economic reparation. Ex presos suffered not only during the dictatorship but also afterward, as they attempted to rebuild their lives. Even having received a set of reparations in the 1990s, I argue in Chapter 8 that the ex presos’ demands for pensions are merited, considering the long-term impacts of torture and imprisonment—some of which are discussed here. Finally, the dissertation concludes with thoughts about wider application of the case study of Argentine former political prisoners.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Transitional Justice and Victims' Voices**

One of my primary aims in writing about the Argentine ex presos' is to circulate their views on transitional justice—the process by which societies remedy human rights violations while transitioning into politically stable and democratic states. Their participation in the process has been severely restricted, at times completely absent, even though they were tortured and illegally arrested and imprisoned for years during the last military dictatorship. Legal scholars and political scientists have largely shaped our knowledge on transitional justice (Teitel 2000, Ensalaco 2004; Fletcher, Weinstein and Rowen 2009), but this dissertation uses ethnography to present the views of ex presos in their own terms and to take seriously what they believe to be at stake.

Anthropologists have already written on post-war memory (Shaw 2002; Slyomovics 1998), reparations (Johnston and Slyomovics 2009; LaPlante and Theidon 2008), and truth commissions (Borneman 1997; Wilson 2001), but they are relatively new to the field. On why anthropological perspectives on transitional justice matter, Alexander Hinton wrote: “Justice is always enmeshed with locality and that transitional and other justice initiatives are often quite messy and often fail to attend to critical on-the-ground realities, ranging from social structure, to local knowledge, to complex histories and to the assumptions that underlie such endeavors” (2010:17). This study shows that experiences with truth commissions, trials, memorials, and reparations have been uneven in the Argentine human rights community—between families of the disappeared and the survivors, and that plurality of experiences exists within those two groups as well.

The paradigmatic model of transitional justice was developed within the context of Latin American countries transitioning from dictatorships to democracies, but recent scholarship has challenged the proposition that transitional justice is a post-World War II innovation by reminding us of legal remedies practiced in Ancient Greece (Leebaw 2008). Argentina is no exception. Human rights activists in Córdoba believe trials against former military officials ensures democracy, that the present state distinguishes itself from its dictatorial past with criminal justice. But this model fails to account for the fact that conflict and abuses also occur in democratic states, not only authoritarian ones, such as “the troubles” in Ireland (Aoláin and Campbell 2005).

Transitional justice processes vary across countries and time periods; unique histories, political contexts, diverse actors, and economic capabilities produce different kinds of responses. Depending on who is in power and histories of political tensions, the political landscape can change drastically. The state mechanisms pursued as alternatives to “traditional” forms of Western legal justice, such as truth commissions, amnesties, memorials, and reparations, have come to define the field; trials are also part of the transitional justice arsenal, although they are often considered separately from the non-punitive measures.

In general, transitional justice has focused on how a new political establishment gains legitimacy by addressing past human rights abuses. The focus has largely revolved around theories of justice—how to care for the needs of victims generally but more importantly, how to prevent a resurgence of violence. Some of the debates have been around whether or not to punish perpetrators or to grant amnesty (Nino 1996), while others have suggested that truth commissions can serve as an alternative to Western forms of punitive justice (Minow 1998).

Though most countries do not seek criminal trials, John Borneman (1997) argues that countries focusing on retributive justice and accountability have more successful post-authoritarian transitions.

Ruti Teitel's foundational work *Transitional Justice* (2000) argues that what makes transitional justice unique is that it takes place during a period of tremendous social change. Yet, to enact any form of justice in times of transition is challenging because of the inherent conflict between the old and new regimes' views of justice, and not enough agreement exists to suggest that one must adhere to past rule of law, or that a new political regime has the right to impose its idea of justice on a previous regime.

In periods of radical political change, the law is unsettled, and the rule of law is not well explained as a source of ideal norms in the abstract. Within the context of a transitional jurisprudence, the rule of law can be better understood as a normative value scheme that is historically and politically contingent and elaborated in response to past political repression often perpetuated under the law (2000:7).

Transitional justice is an “ensemble of established, measured processes of legitimation and gradual political change” (Teitel 2000:223).

The point in which actors actually began using this term “transitional justice” was in the late 1980s, as noted by Paige Arthur (2009), when during the mid-1980s, human rights activists sought to oust repressive regimes in Latin America because of their inability to effectively end human rights violations in those countries. These activists also sought to hold states accountable for crimes that they committed in the past—not simply ones that were ongoing. Transitional justice also gained traction when the grand narratives of Marxist social change and the focus on social structure were no longer seen as the primary means to achieve democracy; elites, not the masses, could create democratic states through state-led transitional justice initiatives. (This change was also related to the fall of Communism in 1989.) With this new model, the primary

aims of transitional justice came to focus on “achieving justice for victims, and achieving a more just, democratic, order” (Arthur 2009:357).

In Argentina, victims of the dictatorship believe that only with justice can the state truly call itself democratic. Trials distinguish democratic governments from the dictatorship. It is possible that the trials may benefit individual victims and families of the victims more than they benefit the state, because holding trials can galvanize political opposition and even stoke the potential for renewed violence, though, as stated earlier, this has been contested by John Borneman’s study on post-socialist Eastern Europe (1997). Still, trials are against individuals and since there are so many to be tried, it appears as a never-ending process. And from a broader viewpoint, the focus on individuals takes away from the broader analysis of the political culture that made the violence possible (Perelli 1994). Political leaders in new regimes may be more interested in reducing, or tempering, the political tensions that led to the conflict in the first place than in punishing those who committed human rights abuses. Nonetheless, prosecuting leaders for human rights abuses has become the current established norm (Sikkink 2011).

Earlier in the 1980s and 1990s, the focus of transitional justice processes was primarily on trade-offs—to prosecute or pardon, for instance—while more recent conversations view the goals of transitional justice as being complementary (Leebaw 2008). The multiple goals of transitional justice, however, are inherently contradictory according to political scientist Bronwyn Leebaw (2008). “It is possible for transitional justice institutions to establish accountability, promote remembrance, and challenge denial, yet at the same time advance political myths that obfuscate responsibility, distort the legacy of political violence, and encourage people to forget potentially volatile issues” (Leebaw 2008:118). In other words, Leebaw posits that transitional justice is not a progressive, linear process but instead moves in



two opposite directions at once. For this reason, Leebaw argues that it is crucial for transitional justice scholars to recognize the conflicting goals in order to challenge assumptions made about the transition process.

### **Truth-telling and healing**

Truth commissions and their reports have been pitched as initiatives to recognize victims and launch healing processes (Agger & Jensen 1990; Fletcher and Weinstein 2009; Hamber and Wilson 2002; Herman 1997; Lederach 1999; Mendeloff 2009; Tutu 1999; Minow 1998).

Narrating new national histories, which includes establishing new truths, carries positive moral implications (Hayner 1994). Scholars such as Martha Minow (1998) and Teresa Phelps (2004) have insisted that truth commissions recognize the dignity of victims, enable states to write new historical narratives, and initiate the slow healing process through victims telling their stories.

However, scholars have begun to question the assumptions made about the benefits of truth commissions, prompting doubts about the ability of such efforts to promote reconciliation, peace, and healing (Fletcher, Weinstein & Rowen 2009; Hamber and Wilson 2002; Mendeloff 2009), or to effectively meet the needs of the whole society (Perelli 1994). More specifically, recent scholarship has challenged the idea that individuals speaking leads to collective healing (van Dongen 2004; Leebaw 2008). Brandon Hamber and Richard Wilson argue that:

Truth commissions do not heal the nation, restore the collective psyche or categorically deal with the past. Their value is much more limited and constrained, and lies in creating a public space in which publicly telling subjective truths, which are but one form of closure among many, may occur. They may also cause further psychological trauma when individuals (such as widows) are treated as the social embodiment of the nation, and are expected to advance at the same pace as the state institutions which are created in their name, but which are primarily pursuing a national political agenda (2002:50).

In other words, truth commissions allow victims to present their truths within a formal channel, supported and legitimated by the government. But participating in the truth commission does not in itself lead to healing—neither for the victims, nor for the nation—and it may be misguided to expect the process to help victims to recover from their irreparable losses, particularly when the real purpose is to create a sense of beginning for a new state or government seeking to establish its own legitimacy and credibility.

Thus, supporters of truth commissions say that healing victims of their desire for revenge fosters a peaceful climate among former adversaries and thereby heals a society as a whole (Minow 1998, Phelps 2004, Hayner 2001). Conversely, critics of truth commissions do not believe that they have the capacity to heal victims, and say that, in fact, the individuals' healing processes are sacrificed in favor of political stability (Moon 2009; Mendeloff 2009; Wilson 2001).

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is one of the most well-known truth commissions because of its primary goal to achieve forgiveness and the widely held perception of its relative success. Richard Wilson (2001) has identified several limitations of the TRC, including its inability to effectively improve a victim's standing in society and marshal the necessary resources to care for some of the most vulnerable victims of apartheid. Richard Wilson summarizes former Archbishop Desmond Tutu's press release on the TRC (November 30, 1995) and describes the TRC's relationship between truth-telling and healing:

Firstly, the nation is conceived of as a physical body, as a generically South African (that is, not generically human) individual projected onto the national scale. What type of body is it? A sick one – one that is in need of healing. Healing the nation is the popular idiom for building the nation. What is the healing treatment prescribed? Truth-telling and, flowing from this, forgiveness and reconciliation. How do these treatments heal the national body? They open the wounds, cleanse them and stop them from festering” (2001:15).

Wilson describes how the TRC was promoted as a remedy to an illness, that the people (or the sick body) can only be healed by telling the truth, which would act as the cure. Forgiveness and reconciliation are the treatments for a nation overcoming past violence and human rights abuses. Thus, unless a society acknowledges publicly what happened in the past, the problems facing that society will continue to worsen over time. For this reason, the wounds must be cleansed early on, before they become infectious and fatal. Individuals, then, allow the collective, national body to heal by testifying to events in the past. These testimonies are followed by forgiveness, not by prosecution.

Based on his 12 months of research, Wilson argues that “retributive understandings of justice are much more salient in South African society than versions emphasizing reconciliation as forgiveness” (2001:27). In other words, the TRC emerged in the context of a liberal discourse of human rights, which mixed with the African concept of *ubuntu*—a concept that interpreted the post-apartheid goal as building community over revenge—positioned the truth commission as an institutional medium to transition the nation into a democracy. Because the TRC stressed reconciliation and forgiveness as a reflection of its backers’ cultural belief in *ubuntu*, retributive justice was cast as being Western and alien. However, Wilson suggests that a more open dialogue could have led to more options, such as civil prosecutions for some families who were clearly wronged by particular actors. One of the underlying motivations behind any state’s promotion of transitional justice efforts is to build the nation, and it is in this context that the TRC should be understood. In the eyes of the new South African state, forgiveness and reconciliation could help establish a nation based on community rather than on separation.

But what is it about truth commissions in particular that so often makes them the central effort in healing societies? In *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History After*

*Genocide and Mass Violence* (1998), Martha Minow argues that truth commissions publicly acknowledge crimes committed against victims but, at the same time, promote reconciliation. Truth commissions are also less costly—financially and politically—than either trials or reparations. As the title of her book suggests, Minow searches for a middle ground – she does not expect victims to forgive, but she also cautions against state efforts that could lead individuals to seek vengeance. In addition to maintaining peace, preventing vengeance, many transitional justice scholars theorize, is crucial to fostering reconciliation, and Minow holds the TRC up as a model in this regard because both sides of the apartheid regime participated, amnesty was offered to perpetrators who confessed, and victims who testified were given public acknowledgement by the state. Thus, the underlying message is that victims heal by airing their grievances.

Minow describes the relationship between healing and truth commissions in this way: “The arduous process of working through trauma that individual therapists can create is not created by a truth commission, but the commission process can offer therapeutic moments” (1998:70). Somewhere along the process of witnessing, participating in, or hearing about the findings of a truth commission, victims feel officially recognized by the state, and this recognition is an important part of a broad and ambiguously defined healing process. Though Minow recognizes that forgiveness is a personal act and that truth commissions are imperfect, she dedicates most of her book to the therapeutic model of truth-telling. Minow concedes that, at the time of her writing, evidence supporting the claim that truth-telling heals remained to be seen. Nevertheless, according to Minow, “Even if the commission cannot create the bond of commitment that therapists seek with a client, public acknowledgment of harms can help individual survivors reestablish a capacity to trust people, even the government” (1998:72).

Healing, then, serves another purpose: to establish a relationship between a (legitimate) state and a citizen. But Minow does not explain how this trust is established and what kind of relationship forms between the state and citizens.

While Minow argues that truth commissions are quasi-legal efforts that help maintain political stability in the aftermath of genocide and mass violence, Teresa Phelps (2004), in *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence and the Work of Truth Commissions*, theorizes that it is the language itself that makes truth commissions effective—that the narratives produced therein rebalances societies and victims. In other words, it is not the truth commission’s tempered form of justice that is salutary but its use of language that fosters individual (and societal) healing. Phelps supports truth commissions on the basis that societies living under repression and violence—and particularly the directly affected victims in such societies—lose their capacity for language, because they are deprived of a voice to describe what is happening to them. And after being wronged, Phelps explains, humans innately desire revenge. In Western texts ranging from Greek tragedies to Shakespearean drama to the Bible, seeking revenge was not just expected, it was once considered to be a righteous act (Phelps 2004:23). In these societies, when a family member was killed, for instance, vengeance was a way for humiliated family members to reclaim their honor. However, as states began assuming the role of meting out punishments—turning revenge into retribution, from an act to be committed in a state of extreme passion to one undertaken within the dispassionate rule of law—societies began to consider revenge, and those who sought revenge, as uncivilized. Accordingly, the only exception to this rule is when states fail to deliver justice. In that case, individuals, as they are conditioned by an innate desire for revenge, may rightfully take justice into their own hands: “For some, the presence and possibility of private revenge remained an imminent possibility, especially if the state failed in its duty to

enact an appropriate rebalancing” (Phelps 2004:31). It is important not to oversimplify Phelps’ argument. She does not view justice as something that happens automatically once certain steps are taken. Instead she views justice as “an ongoing, dynamic process, of which storytelling is a vital part” (Phelps 2004:9). Nevertheless, although she places them in the context of larger transitional justice processes, she attributes individual healing and societal rebalancing to participation in truth commissions, signifying that healing comes from this particular language-based effort around language.

Minow’s theorizes that truth commissions as a form of transitional justice, are powerful because they are themselves balanced. Truth commissions recognize victims but do not punish perpetrators, thereby splitting the difference between doing nothing punitive at all and bringing people to full-fledged trials. Phelps, on the other hand, theorizes that truth commissions are effective because they do the rebalancing by privileging the voices of the formerly silenced victims. In this way, Phelps says, truth commissions establish a new balance among individuals and in entire societies.

Minow and Phelps present their findings through discussions of philosophical and literary texts and by examining the legal and political developments in each country. They do not, however, discuss or analyze firsthand accounts of truth commissions by victims themselves, although they consult the opinions of individuals involved in those endeavors. Priscilla Hayner (2011), in *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity*, does just this, interviewing those involved in creating truth commissions and the survivors who participated in them. Hayner reviews the origin and operation of forty truth commissions undertaken between 1974 and 2009 and assesses whether or not truth-telling acts as a functional alternative to trials. Hayner explores the impacts truth commissions had on how people live with one another despite

having endured repression, war, and violence. She asked officials, survivors and citizens of countries engaging in transitional justice processes about their respective truth commissions. Unsurprisingly, not all truth commissions are alike, in part because their goals differ. Some focus more heavily on creating new historical narratives like Guatemala's 1994 Historical Clarification Commission; others are more focused on individual crimes and reconciliation efforts like South Africa's 1995 Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Despite these differences, truth commissions in general recall the past and focus on the future, and do not in themselves put people on trial. Hayner concedes that the healing aspects of truth commissions are most likely overstated, but she insists that truth commissions are victim-centered and that airing personal truths "represents for many victims the first sign of acknowledgment by any state body that their claims are credible and that the atrocities were wrong" (2001:16). *Not* telling the truth could hold a society back, and perhaps for this reason, Hayner connects the goal of reconciliation with truth commissions because attempting to build a different future.

While Minow, Phelps, and Hayner attribute healing benefits to truth commissions, other scholars are more critical of the relationship between truth-telling and healing. David Mendeloff (2009) reviews empirical evidence collected within the fields of forensic and clinical psychology to determine, in a data-driven study, whether truth-telling promotes psychological healing for victims, or whether it is harmful for those who participate, or if it has no discernible positive or negative impact. What makes Mendeloff's inquiry into healing so significant is that, as stated before, truth commissions are widely believed to lead victims to feel less vengeful, and supporters of truth commissions argue that whole societies benefit from the peace and reconciliation that they foster. Mendeloff disagrees with these claims: "In short, although there is little evidence that truth-telling in general dramatically harms individuals, the notion that formal

truth-telling processes satisfy victims' need for justice, ease their emotional and psychological suffering, and dampen their desire for vengeance remains highly dubious" (2009:596).

Mendeloff believes that achieving peace—defined as the absence of renewed conflict—may not require individual healing among victims, and that for those individuals, "healing is a long-term process that requires working with a trusted, professional therapist in a safe environment" (2009:613).

The relationship between truth-telling and healing is also challenged by Karen Brounéus (2008) who, based on her interviews with 16 women in Rwanda, found that participants in the Gacaca courts (the "traditional" system of communal justice that was adapted to perform as a court for crimes of genocide) experienced "intense psychological suffering" after testifying and their lives became less secure as a result of their participation. Furthermore, Brounéus suggests that testifying did not alleviate their having suffered from sexual violence or address the numerous socioeconomic obstacles they faced as they attempted to rebuild their lives after the 1994 genocide. Similarly, Brandon Hamber and Richard Wilson argue that national processes of truth-telling and reconciliation do not impact individual processes of healing but, to the contrary, place an unfair demand on the victims that they heal themselves for the sake of society (2002).

The combinations of different kinds of transitional justice efforts have also been called into question, including the effectiveness of truth commissions not accompanied by punitive trials (Lambourne 2004; Wilson 2003). Claire Moon (2009) explicitly likens the therapeutic models of truth commissions and reconciliation with amnesties. Moon explains how two assumptions made about post-conflict societies—that the state is responsible for the psychological health of its citizens and that it must heal a traumatized society to manage conflict—steer states to focus on "trauma" as a consequence of violence (2009:75). A



medicalized view of political processes replaces moral reasons for state actions; truth-telling becomes the therapy, rather than trials. With the therapeutic model replacing the moral paradigm to justify state actions, efforts that departed from the medical metaphor had to be recast: "Whilst there were strong practical (political) reasons for eschewing trials, there were no compelling moral reasons, and these had to be constructed after the (amnesty) fact" (Moon 2009:80). These amnesties are then supposed to lead to reconciliation, which will theoretically end violence. However, just as biomedicine cannot cure all illnesses, truth commissions cannot always, if at all, bring about feelings of satisfaction, dignity, and closure for victims.

Moon (2009) approaches the relationship between truth-telling and healing by first explaining how the notion of healing came to be relevant in postwar societies in the first place. The nature of war has changed over time to involve more civilians in the theatre of war, and to leave more combatants and bystanders suffering from trauma afterward: the "war-torn societies are traumatized and require therapeutic intervention" (2009:77). Moon also argues that truth commissions are supported because they "cure" victims, and by doing so, lessen desires for retributive justice (2009:81). However, Moon takes this logic a step further by identifying another state interest. By curing victims, states are also able to issue amnesties to perpetrators. The justification for amnesties relies on the theory that they prevent new conflict, but can only do so by stymieing individual calls for justice. Moon writes, "The state is legitimate not just because it can forcibly suppress conflict and violence (Hobbes), or because it can deliver justice and protect rights (Locke), but because it can cure people of the pathologies that, on this account, are a potential cause of the resurgence of future violence" (2009:86). However, Moon critiques South Africa's TRC—the dominant model for truth commissions—for its emphasis on individual violations, because by focusing on individual cases, it neglects "the broader conditions under

which such violations became possible” (2009:82). States may support the belief that truth-telling can heal a society, Moon posits, because this belief will allow their new governments to offer amnesties for the sake of political stability.

As discussed so far, truth commissions are based on an underlying Western and psychoanalytic belief that speaking leads to healing. This therapeutic model is repeatedly applied in part because it responds to another concept that has grown in its presence and application without necessarily being defined: trauma (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). All of the societies that hold truth commissions are seen to be traumatized, and Moon brings attention to the fact by discussion how the nature of war has changed over time. Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009) explore the historical development of the concept of trauma during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They argue that “cultural trauma” and “historical trauma” have become the dominant currency in the moral economy. Victims claim reparations based on the fact that they have been traumatized (Fassin and Rechtman 2009:15). Cultural trauma is defined as the “wounds in the collective memory that contribute to the construction of identity in different social groups” (Fassin and Rechtman 2009:15). Historical trauma refers to the ways historical events have affected larger groups or regions, such as apartheid in South Africa or colonization in Latin America and Africa (Fassin and Rechtman 2009:15). Truth commissions are believed to have the power to heal both cultural and historical trauma.

But who, exactly, is healed? Societies do not actually possess a conscience (Hamber and Wilson 2002) and there is no clear definition of which people or groups have been traumatized (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). The ambiguity hints at another problematic aspect of the argument that truth commissions have salutary properties: the tension between personal and political goals. Societies that undertake truth commissions can rank the needs of the individual, or personal

needs, as secondary to the needs of the collective, or political interests. In other words, truth commissions may explicitly favor victims even when perpetrators are invited to participate, but state actors ultimately prioritize the stability of the nation over the personal problems experienced by individual citizens. Thus, the collective interest of having a society recover and reconcile is of practical and political import, but one that, the critics of truth commissions argue, ultimately neglects the needs of the individual victims.

### **Transitional Justice in Argentina**

Argentina has taken a comprehensive approach to transitional justice. In 1983, Argentina returned to democratic rule and Raul Alfonsín was democratically elected. Almost immediately after assuming office, Alfonsín created a truth commission known as CONADEP—the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared. CONADEP conducted its research on the fate of the missing people in a span of a few months and officially registered 8,963 desaparecidos, but its members said that the numbers were in fact much higher but that they were limited in time and resources, and that people were still afraid of speaking. In 1984, CONADEP published its findings in a report called *Nunca Más (Never Again)* and is considered to be the first completed truth commission report. In 1985, Alfonsín’s government held a Trial of the Junta leaders, which was televised without sound and was accompanied by a newspaper that contained the transcripts and sold out every week. Nine high ranking military officials were sentenced to prison, some only a few years and others for life. Trials were supposed to continue, but the military threatened to overthrow the government again and even staged an uprising. In response,

Alfonsín passed two laws: the 1986 *Ley de Punto Final* (Full Stop Law)<sup>8</sup> and 1987 *Ley de Obediencia Debida* (Due Obedience Law)<sup>9</sup>. The laws dismissed any lower ranking military officers of responsibility under the logic that they were simply following orders, and placed a deadline in which trials could be brought up against those responsible for human rights abuses. There was one exception, however. All of those who had a role in stealing babies of female prisoners could still be tried. About 500 babies were stolen. Since then 104 have been recovered.

In 1989, Carlos Menem was elected president and in the name of reconciliation, he pardoned all of those who had been sentenced in 1985. Menem also pardoned others who were tried or about to be brought to trial in 1990, and also granted reparations to families of the disappeared (Law. No. 24.4111) and those who had been detained arbitrarily (Decree 70/91 Law No. 24.043). The reparations were paid in bonds starting in 1994. During Menem's tenure, speaking about the dictatorship became taboo, and state surveillance programs resumed, which meant that people who had been imprisoned for political reasons were monitored and threatened again. It was during this era of impunity that a new human rights group, HIJOS: Children for Identity and Against Forgetting and Silence, formed in Córdoba. They staged protests, or *escraches*, outside the homes of known military officials responsible for the deaths of *desaparecidos*, where they threw red paint on houses to symbolize blood and shout "murderer!" to publicly shame individuals. "When there is no justice, there are *escraches*," the saying goes for HIJOS.

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<sup>8</sup> This law established a deadline by which people had to file cases against former military officials in an attempt to limit the number of trials.

<sup>9</sup> This law freed subordinate military officers from any responsibility for crimes committed during the dictatorship under the logic that they were simply following orders given to them by their superiors.

After Menem, there were three presidents in four years between 1999 and 2003 because of serious economic problems. Argentina had a complete economic collapse in 2001, because of massive economic mismanagement starting from the dictatorship in 1976 until Menem's deregulation of national industries, and large loans from the IMF.

Human rights groups, however, continued to pressure the government to resume trials against the military officials, and when former President Néstor Kirchner took office in 2003, he helped marshal political and judicial support that would eventually overturn the so-called "impunity laws" in 2005 and annul Menem's pardon in 2007. These two events led to the reopening of trials that are ongoing as of this writing. In addition, starting in the mid 2000s, several new memorials and memorialized spaces in an effort to promote human rights and memory have been established. His successor and wife, current President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner continued to support human rights.

Argentina's transitional justice process, which is still ongoing, has been one of the most influential models. The 1984 truth commission report *Nunca Más* was innovative for its use of testimonies from survivors of the secret concentration camps and family members of the disappeared victims to denounce the human rights violations committed by the dictatorship. In his analysis of the impact of CONADEP, Emilio Crenzel argues that there are several lessons to be learned: (1) the importance of constructing the truth as soon as possible; (2) progress reports before publication strengthens the legitimacy of the findings; (3) an investigation of truth may help as a pre-judicial effort for upcoming trials; (4) the use of legal language excludes a more historical analysis of the violence, political conflicts and the political commitments on victims; and (5) distrust between civil society groups and the government can be overcome to produce a truth investigation (Crenzel 2008:190). Crenzel argues that Argentina's truth commission was

widely influential for other countries that also suffered political violence in the 1970s and 1980s by following suit.

When president Raúl Alfonsín created CONADEP, he also appointed three human rights advisors. Two of these advisors were legal scholars Carlos Santiago Nino and Jaime Malamud Goti.<sup>10</sup> According to Goti, CONADEP was created to prepare Argentine citizens for the planned trial in 1985; the publication of victims' testimonies were intended to draw public support for the upcoming trial (interview JMG, 5/17/2008).

Both Nino and Goti have published on their reflections of Argentina's transitional justice process. In his book *Radical Evil on Trial* (1996), Nino argues that the 1985 trial was successful in punishing only a limited number of military and guerrilla leaders in order to maintain a democratic state. Nino believes that holding an unlimited number of trials to punish as many military officers as are thought to have been responsible for torture, killings, and other human rights violations runs counter to the larger project of re-establishing democracy in Argentina (1996:187). For Nino, the bigger question is how to resolve the underlying problems in Argentine society that threaten democracy, such as the perpetually unequal distribution of power and enduring political tensions. Trials could potentially take attention and resources away from addressing these issues. In fact, trials against those who committed human rights violations should be tried in international courts, Nino argues; national governments should be concerned with preventing future violations (1996:188).

Goti (1998) is also critical of the 1985 trial, and argues that the 1985 trial against the military repressors only encouraged bi-polar logic in that those who weren't found guilty were then assumed to be innocent of any crimes even if they participated in the dictatorship. Thus, the

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<sup>10</sup> The third advisor was Eduardo Rabossi.

inability to prosecute every responsible actor meant that it ruled people innocent by failing to bring them to trial, since others were considered to be guilty. Goti (1998) believed that one of the signs that prove that the trials have failed is the fact that some past repressors have gone on to win enough political support to be elected to office. While the dictatorship lost power, the rhetoric popular then continued to resonate with the general population. In certain provinces, this was enough to bring former military officials into elected political office.

Goti (2002) argues for his victim-centered approach, explaining that instead of focusing on how the perpetrator broke the law, the focus should be on the punishment and on the ways it helps restore the victim's sense of dignity. However, Goti does not address whether victims interpret dignity in the same way that he believes they do, or if they even desire it. Goti argues that even if a psychological deficit can be filled with the punishment of a perpetrator, there is little or no evidence to show that victims actually feel better after perpetrators are punished—though he does not himself interview victims.

In the same year that the second wave of trials against former military officials began, Goti (2005) argues that the state should not renew efforts to bring perpetrators to trial because blaming these actors would prevent a rich history emerging. The blaming of perpetrators might make victims feel better through a public denunciation, Goti argued, but it simplifies history. As a result, people do not engage in an honest analysis of what happened in the past. It is unclear why Goti does not suggest that truth commissions compose their narratives differently—as Lisa LaPlante (2008) suggests adding a socioeconomic analysis. Goti insists that by not having trials, the discussion is more complex because no particular person can be identified as fully guilty or as the “bad” guy. However, in the years when the amnesty was in effect, there is little evidence to show that the dialogue on the past differed in its complexity.

Sociologist Carina Perelli also critiques the 1985 trial. Like Goti, she expresses concerns about who does and who does not get assigned responsibility for allowing state violence to occur. Perelli notes that the trials emphasized the “discrete crimes against individual victims” in which the individual gruesome stories left out a collective dimension (1994:50). Thus, the trials limited the circulation of narratives that conveyed just how widespread the impact the dictatorship was on the general society. While Goti writes and speaks about who is labeled guilty and innocent, Perelli is interested in the population that is neither perpetrator nor victim: “There was no place in this narrative for the common people who had not been imprisoned, disappeared, and tortured” (1994:50). Perelli questions the legal framework of trials because of the way they documented abuses ended up focusing attention only on a restricted number of those who were affected. Moreover, trials equally neglected those whose inaction could be seen as blameworthy. Legal paradigms defined victimhood by discrete crimes rather than as suffering within a repressive state.

Furthermore, by neglecting to take a broader view on how all of society had a hand in the past violence, the 1985 trial portrayed the conflict as being particular to two groups—leaving the rest of the population free of any responsibility. By trying two alleged sides of the conflict—nine junta leaders and seven guerrilla leaders—in the 1985 trial, Alfonsín’s government claimed it had averted more military reprisals by maintaining an illusion of neutrality, but it still failed to historicize the conflict and deal with long enduring political disputes. In her critique, Perelli writes, “Argentines chose as scapegoats for all of the evils of the past both the guerillas and the armed forces, but especially the armed forces, instead of entering the long, soul-draining, and painful revision of a past full of violence” (1994:39). Thus, for Perelli, the government did not address what Nino refers to as the underlying reasons for tensions—not because there was a trial



but because of how the trial was held. Nino suggests that our attention should be focused on building democracy, whereas Perelli critiques how the trial chose to speak about the conflict—though she does not say whether a trial should or should not be held. The 1984 truth commission and 1985 trial listed testimonies of individual victims rather than describing how violence was enacted from a far broader and complicated set of power networks—both domestic and international—in order to suppress revolutionary movements (Perelli 1994). In other words, Alfonsín’s response did not confront the root problems that plagued the country, such as the failing economy, a weak political system, and passive witnesses in the face of violence.

In following Perelli, Elizabeth Jelin also critiques the superficiality of using a legal paradigm to enact transitional justice: “The formal judicial framework eliminated all references to ideologies and political commitments of the victim. The objective was to determine that crimes had been committed, without asking about—and explicitly omitting—the possibility of political motives behind the actions of both victims and perpetrators” (2003:54). In short, the state condemned torture and disappearances but did not explain why the military was torturing and killing in the first place, and recognized that Argentine citizens suffered but did not acknowledge why the disappeared victims opposed the dictatorship. One of the reasons why the state avoided speaking about the identities of the victims is that, according to Jelin, the human rights groups’ efforts to clearly distinguish the victims from the military meant “...silencing the militancy of many of the disappeared and the political conflicts and the armed struggle that immediately preceded the dictatorship. The dominant image was an ‘innocent’ victim, grabbed away from normal life by state terrorism” (2003:54). Stories of political militancy are omitted in human rights narratives, including those that were solicited for inclusion in truth commission reports and in trials, where the main objective was to draw attention toward the crimes

committed by the military and the police, and not to the political agency—and therefore the potential guilt—of the victims.

What is clear from the scholarship on Argentina's transitional justice process is the degree to which it faults for its narrow scope. Trials, truth commissions and other initiatives, scholars have shown, decontextualized and dehistoricized the conflict. Scholars have pointed to the lack of attention paid to addressing the underlying tensions that set the ground for violence, as well as the lack of rigorous analysis of the actions of all citizens—not simply those categorized as victims and perpetrators but the role of all members of society in allowing the violence to take place.

These critiques draw attention to the limitations of such efforts and raises questions not only about how to improve such measures but also the impact of them. One of the questions that remains is how to measure the success or effectiveness of transitional justice efforts, as they are becoming increasingly relevant for several countries embarking on transition periods. In response to the criticism that human rights scholarship lacks methodological rigor and draws conclusions based on a pre-existing commitment to human rights, Coomans, Grunfeld and Kamminga suggest that scholars be more explicit with their particular disciplinary methodology in order to produce more objective, impartial, and reliable data (2010:186). Since most efforts were championed on the grounds of reconciliation, peace, and democracy building, scholars have inquired whether or not particular efforts have brought about these goals after their implementation (Ensalaco 1994, LaPlante and Theidon 2008, Lambourne 2004). These concerns over measurement and methodology follow a consideration of whether or not the moral precepts of recognition and testimony have been enough to justify these state efforts. The critical question is not whether or not a specific kind of effort has achieved peace, reconciliation, or

healing, but instead whether the society has moved closer to these goals over time, as a cumulative result, and whether that state's has maintained its ongoing commitment to victims as new needs emerge.

### **Representations of Suffering**

Descriptions of the “Dirty War” typically mention the military coup d’etat that ousted the ill-prepared de facto President Isabel Perón and embarked on an anti-Communism campaign. The dictatorship hunted down any suspected subversive to allegedly preserve their country from an outside infection. The definition of subversive was arbitrary as victims from all walks of life, some politically active and others not, were targeted. To avoid claiming responsibility for their actions, however, the military kidnapped victims without any official records and tortured them in secret detention centers. They died under torture or were simply executed and disposed of in mass graves. Some bodies, however, will remain forever lost because the Navy dropped victims—while they were still alive—out of airplanes and into the Atlantic Ocean. Of these kidnapped victims, 30,000 were permanently disappeared.

A common reading of this general description of what happened between 1976 and 1983 identifies the military as the perpetrators and the disappeared as the victims. This binary, or “black and white” narrative, constructs a simplified narrative to elicit an emotional response in favor of the victim. Sally Engle Merry describes how activists present their knowledge in this way: “Successful activists focus on telling compelling personal cases with simple story lines of suffering and responsibility supported by statistical documentation of the extent and frequency of the problem. These are designed to generate outrage and action” (2005:241). These types of activist narratives are found in international human rights reports, such as the reports of site visits

in Argentina during the dictatorship by Amnesty International (1979) and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (1980), or in Iain Guest's *Behind the Disappearances* (1990), which documents the dictatorship's attempts to thwart the United Nations from investigating the disappearances.

In contrast, academic writing about suffering focuses on the victims and their everyday experience in the aftermath or their ongoing struggles with violence. Anthropologists often include personal stories about individual victims, but they also draw attention toward the root causes of the conflict, contextualize the violence, and in some cases, discuss the blurred lines between perpetrators and victims. Just as she described activist writing, Merry also identified the way academics write: "Academics are more likely to tell more complex, even involuted stories. Abuses are typically understood in the context of systemic features of political and economic organization rather than individual villainy" (240:241).

Among the best written accounts of Argentina's dictatorial period and the aftermath is Marguerite Feitlowitz's (1998) *Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*. Feitlowitz provides a comprehensive account of paranoia, fear and psychotic atmosphere of the military dictatorship based on six years of interviews with survivors of torture, relatives of desaparecidos, bystanders, torturers, and those who were complicit in the disappearances. Feitlowitz examines the way in which the military manipulated language to confuse, deny, and conceal their crimes and justify their actions. An entire new vocabulary is invented to describe the unprecedented forms of violence in secret concentration camps. Also included in her analysis is the complicity some members of the Argentine Jewish community had in the disappearance of Jewish victims, who were disproportionately represented among victims, and the decimation of the Agrarian Leagues in the province of Corrientes. Feitlowitz conducted her study between

1989 and 1996 during the so-called impunity era under President Carlos Menem. What makes her study remarkable is the fact that the government had resumed its surveillance programs, threatening survivors and others marked as potentially subversive. Many were afraid to speak, or were too troubled to speak. The past was still present, in places where terror occurred. This period was also unique in Argentina because it was the only time in which the *pacto de silencio* (silence pact) was broken. Former navy captain Adolfo Scilingo publicly confessed his role in helping to murder disappeared victims by injecting them with chemicals to induce drowsiness and paralysis before shoving them out of airplanes and into the Atlantic Ocean. Feitlowitz's book ends with a critique of the lack of justice in Argentina, and views her work as part of the noble effort in remembering what was denied or willfully forgotten.

In *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina*, Antonius Robben argues that the violence that took place during the last Argentine military dictatorship caused tremendous amount of trauma, and it is this trauma that led to more violence, rather than the belief that violence beget more violence (2005a:344; 2005b). Neither violence nor trauma suddenly erupted in Argentine society; each one fed the other. While Robben did not witness an end to the trauma and the continuing efforts to commemorate the past, he does conclude that all of the memories of the past—however contested—will eventually become a part of the national narrative and that there will be reconciliation in the future (2005a). Suffering in Argentina is represented as a historical phenomenon; since 1945 various dictatorships have used violence to control citizens and the responses by the masses over the decades leading up to the 1976 coup d'etat have also been violent.

Both Feitlowitz and Robben interviewed human rights activists, survivors, and former military officials to present their knowledge of suffering in Argentina. These authors do not ask

readers to identify with the victims, but rather to gain deeper knowledge of how repression operates, the lasting effects of violence, and possible future resolutions for the individuals and society.

Returning to the question of what is the purpose of writing about suffering and what readers should expect from these writings, I turn to Joseph Slaughter's essay "Humanitarian Reading" (2009). Slaughter advocates a different model of reading narratives of suffering than the one offered by public intellectuals Richard Rorty, Martha Nussbaum, and K. Anthony Appiah. Rather than focusing on the problem of the reader identifying with the sufferer, Slaughter instead highlights the relationship between the writer and the reader. Slaughter's argument evolves from his analysis of Henry Dunant's account of one of Italy's war for national independence, *A Memory of Solferino* (1862). Dunant's witnessing of the soldiers dying in the battlefield was so powerful that his account and social activism led to the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Slaughter emphasizes the fact that Dunant advocated for care and relief for all of the soldiers who were wounded and dying in the battlefields. According to Slaughter, Dunant's desire to be a part of humanitarian relief is what the reader can identify with because both are the third actors. The reader is not asked to identify and empathize with the soldier but with the observer's—in this case the writer—and his desire to give aid to the sufferer. Thus, the reader's relation to the sufferer is metaphorical, while the reader's relation to the writer is metonymical (Slaughter 2009:91). That is, the reader-observer is connected to the sufferer through the shared sense of humanitarianism instead of imaginative identification with the victim. The reader does not need to project herself into the position of suffering but rather assumes the position of the volunteer. Furthermore, the writer has already assumed that the reader is part of the same moral community.

Slaughter also advocates a model that cultivates an indifference to difference. The soldiers on both sides of the war in *A Memory of Solferino* require care and all of the men should be regarded with sympathy. Slaughter points to one particular passage in which a horse delicately walks through the battlefield to avoid stepping on any soldiers, regardless of nationality. Similarly, Slaughter believes the lesson is this: “*Un Souvenir de Solferino* invites us to begin our sentimental education by responding to the narrative initiation to learn to read the dignity and humanity of others with the indifference of a horse” (2009:106). The reader-observer in Slaughter’s model of humanitarian reading advocates for a humanitarian response for all human beings, regardless of difference in power and nationality.

Slaughter’s model of humanitarian reading suggests that the people on both sides of a conflict suffer and therefore deserve sympathy and aid. Within transitional justice, the vast majority of truth commission reports is victim-centered and solicits sympathy only for the sufferers. The universal framework of this truth commission report appears in its focus on the human rights violations. Any person who experiences the human rights violation deserves sympathy and aid, regardless of nationality. In the case of ex presos, it could be argued that regardless of the fact that some parts of society regard them as terrorists, they still deserve aid and sympathy because they suffered human rights violations. Reader-observers have a responsibility to maintain their position in the moral community by cultivating their humanitarianism with an indifference to difference.

Yet, this indifference remains limited. The humanitarian interventions in countries implementing transitional justice initiatives are not necessarily seeking to provide aid to both sides—even when they are seeking reconciliation. Reparations are distributed to the victims, and trials—if held—are not intended only for those who were in power during the repression, war, or

genocide. Still, Slaughter's model reminds us to critically examine the role of the observer, and not simply the conflict itself.

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Several scholars have examined history and socioeconomic factors in transitional justice processes (LaPlante 2008, Robben 2005a, Slyomovics 2005b, Borneman 1997), and this research continues in that vein by analyzing the ex presos' political motives in participating in the transitional justice process. Both Feitlowitz and Robben have interviewed survivors but neither worked explicitly with those who self-define themselves as former *political* prisoners—survivors who profess explicitly political identities. I follow Amnesty International's definition of political prisoner:

In [Amnesty International's] usage, any prisoner whose case has a significant political element: whether the motivation of the prisoner's acts, the acts in themselves, or the motivation of the authorities. The category of political prisoners includes people who resort to criminal violence for a political motive. AI asks that they be given fair and prompt trial. AI does not use the term political prisoner to convey any special status for these detainees or to indicate that AI takes a position on their political goals.

In addition, Amnesty International's definition of prisoner of conscience also applies to some of the ex presos: "A person imprisoned for his or her belief(s), sex, sexual orientation, race, ethnic origin, language or religion, provided he or she has neither used nor advocated violence." To clarify, I do not extensively explore why these ex presos chose to become militants or their specific political dreams; rather I investigate how their political identities matter today, particularly as those identities inform their participation in memorialization projects.

The official state narrative of the dictatorial violence, known as the "Two Demons Theory," describes a conflict that pitted leftist terrorists, or guerrillas, against the military. By issuing a blanket amnesty, former President Carlos Menem advocated for reconciliation between



these two sides of the conflict. Yet, in the same way that the families of the disappeared and survivors reject the term “Dirty War,” and favor the term “dictatorship” to describe the years of military rule, they oppose the official characterization of the conflict and view the military as the sole perpetrators of the conflict. During my fieldwork in Argentina, none of the human rights activists I interacted with mentioned reconciliation as a goal or as a desired outcome.

Furthermore, there is little to no evidence<sup>11</sup> demonstrating that the former military officials in general, show any remorse for their actions, nor have they publicly professed a desire for reconciliation.

Examining the fight for reparations also required a deeper understanding of the diversity within the Argentine human rights community. In this way, this research contributes to anthropological studies of human rights (Merry 2005; Goodale 2009) as I observe the impacts of the international human rights paradigm (e.g. United Nations), the local particularities of Córdoba’s human rights community in Argentina, and the internal dynamics within the local human rights community of Córdoba.

In what follows, I argue that ex presos have long been ignored in the Argentine human rights community because they do not conform to the silent, innocent victim that the family-based human rights groups have created around the desaparecidos. As a result, the ex presos have suffered social, political, and economic consequences because of their status as survivors, in addition to the physical and psychological effects of having been tortured and imprisoned in degrading conditions. This neglect of ex presos exposes one of the limitations of the way in which the kin-based groups defined human rights as an apolitical endeavor. This made it

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<sup>11</sup> Retired Navy Captain Adolfo Scilingo publicly confessed his role in killing victims on March 2, 1995 and another half-dozen of ex-military men admitted their actions in the torture and killings of victims. These individuals, however, did not break the “Silence Pact” amongst military officials who refuse to speak about the victims and their role in the dictatorship.

difficult for ex presos to petition for reparations as victims while maintaining their identity as militants in the public eye.

It was not until former President Nestor Kirchner validated survivors that ex presos began to have a role in state memorialization projects. I argue that ex presos maintain memories in the public consciousness through testimonies, archives and memorials because they view this participation as a form of activism. They believe their role as militants is to share their memories of the past and to teach youth about recent Argentine history. Because ex presos possess unique knowledge of memorialized spaces. I claim that they are a fundamental part of the country's efforts in creating collective memories.

Finally, I argue that maintaining their political identities in prison by demonstrating solidarity and finding ways to resist the prison conditions helped these ex presos survive. These political identities remain the primary explanation for participation in memorialized spaces, trials, and protests three decades after they were imprisoned. And even as they seek reparations as victims of torture, the ex presos do not view themselves as victims in general but as survivors whose political beliefs were the reason for their imprisonment and their activism today.

## Chapter 3

### “They Disowned Us Twice”

Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years in prison from 1962 to 1990 for his role as a militant anti-apartheid activist. Even with his involvement with the armed wing of the African National Congress, Mandela is celebrated as one of the most important leaders of freedom and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993. Similarly, former political prisoner and Burmese opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her non-violent activism for democracy and human rights. Both Mandela and Suu Kyi are seen as the bearers of truth. We respect them for having found a way to live through imprisonment and for testifying to the horrors they experienced and witnessed in order to—we always hope—prevent such injustice and violence from happening again. Perhaps this was the reason why I had assumed that those who were held in Argentine concentration camps and survived torture and cruelty during Argentina’s last military dictatorship would be seen by their fellow citizens to have moral authority over others in passing on memories of what they had experienced as prisoners.

I found this not to be the case in Argentina. Former political prisoners who survived in Argentina did not have a central voice in the public and in the human rights arena until nearly thirty years after the coup d’etat in 1976 (Jelin 2009:177). While journalist Jacobo Timerman, writer Alicia Partnoy, and social scientist Pilar Calviero are well known Argentine survivors whose writings are highly regarded, they are, by and large, exceptional.<sup>12</sup>

Why were the ex presos marginalized in Argentina?

The answer is in part found in how the nation identified the guilty and the innocent.

*Nunca Más* and the 1985 trial of the military Juntas were both premised on what the government

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<sup>12</sup> *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (1981); *The Little School* (1986); and *Poder y Desaparición* (2006).

called the *teoria de los dos demonios* or the “Two Demons Theory.” According to this theory, both the dictatorship and the guerrilla organizations were responsible for the violence that engulfed Argentina between 1976 and 1983, and that the rest of society fell victim to both forces (Familiares 2006). Many of the ex presos were part of these guerrilla organizations and despite having being tortured and illegally detained, they were now labeled as terrorists after the dictatorship’s demise. This theory enabled President Alfonsín (1983-1989) to try the military without undermining the military institution, and at the same time condemn armed revolutionary groups without adding to the suffering of survivors (Perelli 1994: 39-66).

However, the Two Demons Theory did not completely ignore the fact that there were victims. CONADEP focused on survivor testimonies of torture and accounts of disappearances from families of the missing; it did not discuss any guerrilla activities among victims, and instead provided persuasive testimony to be used against the military in the 1985 trial. When conducting the trial, which lasted for seven months in 1985, the prosecutors focused on victims without any political affiliations. “The most powerful cases were presented first, including those of victims who had no connection to the guerrilla movements,” wrote Kathryn Sikkink (2011:73).

Five years after this trial, succeeding President Menem (1989-1999) would use the “Two Demons Theory” to form the ideological basis for granting a full amnesty to the military’s rank and file. Menem argued that this pardon would lead to national reconciliation; his critics considered it an undeserved impunity granted to criminals.

Argentina’s transitional justice process was also operating at a very important historical turn for human rights that was taken up by families of the disappeared in such a way that they excluded the survivors who were part of guerrilla groups that were now discredited. In his book, *The Last Utopia*, Samuel Moyn (2010) argues that human rights gained momentum in the wake

of the Cold War and decolonization movement precisely because the dreams of revolution and popular struggles were deemed failures (141). The families of the disappeared used human rights as a strategy to enforce basic legal rights that transcended national borders and politics. Groups like the Madres networked with international human rights organizations, which had the effect of amplifying their domestic causes and placing pressure on the Argentine government to stop human rights abuses (Keck and Sikkink 1998:107).

The families of the disappeared who championed their cause under the banner of human rights separated themselves from politics. They rejected the Two Demons Theory on the grounds that there was no war because it would have required two relatively equal sides. And in the process of arguing that the disappeared were the sole victims, they also disassociated them from any political affiliation. These groups included the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas, H.I.J.O.S.<sup>13</sup>, and Herman@s de Desaparecidos por la Verdad y la Justicia.<sup>14</sup> According to Jelin, “The disappeared and the imprisoned were presented by their relatives as exemplary children, good students, and members of families living in harmony; in sum, as ideal or ‘normal’” (2009:183). These kin-based groups crafted this image while simultaneously establishing the meaning of human rights in Argentina as protection from a military regime. “[T]here is nothing self-evident about the meaning of human rights at all. They are made, not discovered. They get their meaning through practice,” wrote Stephen Hopgood (2006:215).

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<sup>13</sup> Members are primarily children of the disappeared, but this organization also includes children of former political prisoners and sympathizers who are committed to justice.

<sup>14</sup> In English, these organizations are: Mothers of May Plaza (the Madres); The Grandmothers of May Plaza (the Abuelas); Relatives of the Disappeared and Detained for Political Reasons (Familiares); Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia y contra el Olvido y el Silencio, or Children for Identity and Justice and against Forgetting and Silence; Siblings of Desaparecidos for Truth and Justice. The “@” sign is used in Spanish to gender neutralize a word by acknowledging both the feminine “a” and masculine “o”.

But the image of desaparecidos as innocent, idealistic youth contradicted the ex presos' own participation in guerrilla groups. By being innocent or "not political" or "not involved in any political activity," the disappeared victims were able to shed any moral culpability. The baseness of the military's actions is unquestionable if the victims had no agency, if they had no hand in "inviting" the abuse. Ex presos could not be idealized in the same way as the desaparecidos.

As a result, the ex presos don't just find themselves left out of the two main competing narratives of the past; they also face a difficult task in refuting the Two Demons Theory without contradicting other human rights groups. These ex presos avoid the binary models within these dominant narratives because they are neither one of two guilty parties nor are they solely the victims of human rights abuses committed by all-powerful perpetrators. They are in some ways both. They are both victims of state terrorism and militants. Yet, at the same time, they were not and are not powerless, nor were they terrorists deserved the "excessive force" meted out by Argentina's military in the form of CIA-designed methods of torture.

Not only did the ex presos oppose their characterization in the dominant narratives of the past, but their language of liberation and social change was also at odds with the massive economic reforms that were transforming Argentina and privatizing many of its public companies in the 1990s. The truth commission, trials, and reparations undertaken in Argentina reflected the neoliberal climate: "The spread of transitional justice institutions that investigate past abuses has also been identified as symptomatic of a declining faith in possibilities for collective struggles for political change and as evidence of a counterrevolutionary agenda" (Leebaw 2008:97). The ex presos, however, were and are interested in a more political analysis of what happened to them and to their country. They criticize the long-term plan of the military

to break apart communal ties, in order to create a culture of individualism to pave the way for capitalism. From the point of view of the ex presos (and the left-leaning members of the other human rights groups), by eliminating a generation of future revolutionaries, the dictatorship helped set the groundwork for the wealthy landowners to implement neo-liberal policies and begin selling their agricultural products to the global market.

The marginalization of ex presos, however, cannot only be understood as a result of being portrayed as terrorists in the official state narrative, or for not fitting the victim image within the local Argentine human rights movement. According to Ludmila da Silva Catela, the Director of the Provincial Archive and Commission for Memory of Córdoba, the conspicuous absence of studies on former political prisoners in Argentina is due to their being seen as guilty by human rights groups (Interview LdSC, 6/3/2008). Families of the disappeared were suspicious of survivors, believing that they were remaining silent about their collaboration or betrayal of their compañeros, which allowed them to live at the expense of others (Jelin 2009:193).

Thus, ex presos have not only been marginalized, but they have been marginalized twice. As one AEPPC member, Juan Carlos Alvarez, who was imprisoned for eight years and six months for his participation in a labor union and his affiliation with the Montoneros, said, “*Nos negaban dos veces, los militares y los familiares*” (They disowned us twice – the military and the family members.) The military disowned their actions against the ex presos; they denied having kidnapped, tortured, and illegally detained their political opponents. And the broader human rights community also disowned the ex presos—by denying them their victim status, by faulting them for having survived when their own family members did not. The marginalization of ex presos is also demonstrated by a common phrase said during and after the dictatorship: “*Por algo se los llevaron. Por algo los liberaron*” (For some reason they were taken. For some

reason they were released) (Van Drunen 2010:170). Ex presos were suspected first by the general public of having done something to merit their disappearances. After their release, other human rights groups suspected them of having done something to survive.

Once, at an AEPPC meeting, Gladys Regalado, who was imprisoned for 4 years for being a member of the Workers Revolutionary Party, described the attitude of the rest of the human rights community toward them: “*A los ex presos nos discriminan por estar vivos.*” (They discriminate against the former prisoners because they blame us for being alive.) The ex presos have been twice victimized—first by the military when they were taken, and then by the general public and the relatives of the disappeared when they were released.

Their marginalized status helps explain why most ex presos did not join other human rights groups after their release. Atilio Basso, who was imprisoned for four years and six months for his participation in the Workers Revolutionary Party and labor unions, explained why he never joined Familiares and instead helped form the AEPPC:

I was always bound to solidarity from a political place. I never became a part of human rights organizations like Familiares because I never had a family member who was imprisoned or disappeared. It didn't seem to be my place. It was the same thing that I didn't have grandchildren either or anything. Therefore it wasn't where I participated. Yes, in political organizations until, you know, recently I was moved by my interests as a former political prisoner. We played a societal role as promoters of human rights, but the Familiares is an organization specifically for relatives. The fact that other people who are not relatives also exist is something that you got to ask them, the grandmothers, they are the grandmothers; other people with no relatives or something—what can they do in terms of service? (Interview AB, 10/23/2008).

In addition, some ex presos felt that they might be judged for joining human rights groups because they survived. Juan Carlos Alvarez recalled a conversation he had with his mother:

One day I said to her, “I'm going to the human rights organizations.” Then my mom said to me, “How are you going to present yourself in front of the human rights organizations, in front of these Madres that have disappeared children? Or are they not disappeared? Because some say that they are in the South, that they are in some ranch, they don't really know.” I said to her, “Mama, to me they are desaparecidos—I wish it was like that.”



“But how are you going to show yourself?” “That I was in the same way disappeared like the other compañero as well, we were in this situation, so I have to help, I have to contribute to this.” It was very difficult, but I had a path. I was already entrenched in this. I couldn’t not do it. I saw that my mother suffered a lot because of this (Interview JA, 2/25/2009).

This was the second time I had heard this conversation. Once while walking me home after a long meeting, Juan Carlos told me that his mother made him feel guilty for wanting to help search for other desaparecidos with the Madres. For Juan Carlos, it was logical that he would want to help find or free others when he had been in the same situation. But his mother was telling him that it was inappropriate to show up in front of the Madres when their own children were still missing—they would not want to see him. They would want to know why he was released and their children were still missing. Juan Carlos’ mother tried to persuade him by offering a common myth that the disappeared were actually being taken care of somewhere in the southern part of the country. The military helped spur this rumor, suggesting that the disappeared had gone to spas or had left the country. Juan Carlos knew what had happened to the disappeared and he wanted to help, but his survival also made it difficult for him to participate in human rights groups.

As a result of their exclusion from human rights groups and not having status as victims, for decades no group or individual looked after the needs of ex presos. For years, they experienced social discrimination and health problems. The AEPPC members themselves would often say that they were the first such group to organize, when they became an official state organization in 2007, despite the existence of the *Asociación Ex Detenidos Desaparecidos* (Association of Former Detained Disappeared [AEDD]) in Buenos Aires, which had formed in 1992. While both groups are made up of people who had passed through concentration camps and survived, the AEPPC views itself as being part of a distinct social movement. According to

the AEPPC members, AEDD failed to organize or reach out to other provinces. Several *compañeros*—and here I am intentionally avoiding directly attributing remarks to specific individuals—said that AEDD was composed of survivors who were collaborators, making them different from the *ex presos*, who were detained but did not collaborate with their captors to ensure their survival. I pressed on this distinction but was met with few answers. In the end, these divisions are not provable and rest entirely upon gossip and speculation. Nevertheless, the *ex presos* in Córdoba see themselves as part of a new national movement—one led by the AEPPC. *Ex presos* who represent the Buenos Aires province at these national meetings are not the same members who belong to AEDD. During my time in Argentina, I observed at national meetings, through emails, and personal conversations that the AEPPC was the largest and most active group of *ex presos*.

The AEPPC is not a homogenous group of survivors. Many of the AEPPC members met each other in prison. Others knew each other only through their *nombres de guerra* (*noms de guerre*) to avoid naming friends under torture were they “to fall.”<sup>15</sup> The members are, of course, not the same people they were in the 1970s and 1980s. During the 1970s the ideological differences between revolutionary groups carried more weight than they do today, since their respective organizations no longer exist. The survivors find themselves grouping together three decades later, under a commitment to claim reparations and to generally re-engage in current political and social issues from a variety of political and personal viewpoints.

The AEPPC now receives a government stipend that allows the group to rent its own space, similar to funding provided to the other human rights organizations that are part of the

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<sup>15</sup> *Noms de guerre*, literally “war names” are the pseudonyms that *ex presos* adopted to hide their real identities. When *ex presos* spoke about the time that they fell, it means the date in which the military kidnapped them. They fell into the hands of the military. It is common for an *ex preso* to say, for example, “I fell on October 6, 1976.”

Archivo. Currently, the ex presos also have a choir that sings at events, schools, and—appropriately—at prisons. They also are in the process of developing programs to educate children and offer training workshops for those in need of work.

Yet, the path to forming an organization was a long and difficult one. The marginalized status of ex presos is not necessarily immediately apparent to outside observers. To the public, the human rights community (the relatives of the disappeared) appears as a unified front. This is particularly the case in Córdoba, where the community is several times smaller than the one that exists in Buenos Aires, and therefore more likely to be contact with each other and hold events together. Furthermore, despite being perceived as traitors by some families of the disappeared and feeling out of place, the ex presos speak positively about the other human rights groups and respect the Madres a great deal for their role in building the human rights movement. Ex presos are quick to point out that they have benefited from the successes of the broader human rights movement. In addition, many individual ex presos have relationships with other individual members of the human rights groups that supersede organizational boundaries. Nonetheless, within the human rights community, there are many divisions and points of tension. Coming to understand the marginalized status of the AEPPC and the ex presos' need to form an organization took time. Below, I offer a sequence of snapshots from my fieldwork to illustrate the steps I took to reach this realization.

### **February 18, 2008 – First Impressions of the AEPPC**

In preparation for my work with the ex presos in Córdoba, I began visiting archives identified by Louis Bickford (2000), an archivist and memory scholar at the International Center

for Transitional Justice. Bickford identified ten human rights groups<sup>16</sup> with archives containing documents related to the last military dictatorship, but noted that eight of the archives were closed to the public or are extremely unorganized and therefore less than ideal for academic research. Undeterred by Bickford's description, I decided to try to gain access to the "large, unorganized collection of documents" (Bickford 2000:175) at the headquarters of Familiares in hopes of finding reports on any ex presos or CCDs during the last military dictatorship.

When learning how to conduct archival research, I was taught by other archivist-experts at the George Washington University's Summer Institute for Conducting Archival Research that gaining entry to archives outside of the U.S., especially ones that contain politically sensitive documents, requires personal finesse, several gifts, and most importantly, personal connections. At the very least, researchers need a letter on official letterhead approving the research plans. This ended up being particularly true at Familiares; when I first visited, I watched two other foreign scholars fail to get past the front door. I still proceeded, however, and explained to the staff that I was working with the AEPPC, with an invitation from Sara Waitman, the president of the group. I was immediately invited into the office.

While the two staff members offered me Coca-Cola, I launched into a description of my research plans, making sure to list as many of my affiliations as I could. One member of Familiares who was staffing the archive, Hugo Argente, was himself a former political prisoner; he was detained after searching for his disappeared brother, Julio Daniel. Hugo showed me a small collection of objects that were made by the formerly detained—drawings, knitted items,

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<sup>16</sup> The ten archives are: 1. CELS, 2. Movimiento Ecuménico por los Derechos Humanos (MEDH), 3. Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, 4. Liga Argentina por los Derechos del Hombre, 5. Servicio Paz y Justicia (SERPAJ), 6. Madres de la Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora, 7. Madres de la Plaza de Mayo La Asociación, 8. Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas, 9. Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos, 10. Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF).

and small woodcarvings. A few weeks later, Hugo invited me to his home where I conducted an interview with him about his brother and his work with Familiares. But beyond what Hugo showed me personally, I had no control over what archival documents I had access to and the length of time I could spend with the materials.

The most illuminating moment I had at Familiares about the marginalized status of ex presos—and I not did realize its significance until several months later—had nothing to do with the content of the archival documents but rather with a short interaction that granted me access into the office. On my second visit to see Hugo, he asked me again for the name of the reference I had previously offered. As soon as I sat down at the large conference table, Hugo picked up the phone and started dialing. I did not know if the phone call was connected to me, but he kept repeating Sara’s name. I felt slightly nervous because although I had told the truth to get in, and already informed Sara that I used her name, it still felt strange to be actively checked upon—that Hugo was verifying my story. Hugo asked the person on the other line if he or she knew of a Sara, the president of the AEPPC. Hugo then asked the person on the phone if he or she knew anything about me, a student from the U.S. Hugo stopped talking, and what followed was a five-minute silence while the person on the other end of the line talked to Hugo. He hung up. I waited. He pulled out a cigarette and sat down. I asked him if everything was okay. “¿*Todo esta bien?*” Hugo said that yes, everything was fine, that he had called the *casa de Familiares* (Familares’ house) in Córdoba and that they had confirmed that Sara existed and was someone that they knew well, but that they did not have a good relationship with the AEPPC. I asked Hugo why, and he waved the question off with his hand and said that he didn’t know, that the groups just did not get along all that well. I asked him if I should be worried and he assured me that there were always “*quilombos*,” which is Argentine slang for big, fat, insoluble messes.

Even then I knew that despite my contact's being part of a group that was not on the best of terms with the Familiares branch in Córdoba, Sara was a good enough connection for Hugo. Perhaps Hugo's being a former political prisoner himself, and not just the brother of a desaparecido, made him more sympathetic to the ex presos. Whatever the reason, Hugo got up, walked out of the room and came back moments later with a folder—his brother's. The moment he opened the file, whose contents included a weathered photograph and other pieces of evidence that his brother Julio Daniel Argente existed, I felt a wave of relief because his resuming our previous activity meant that I had been vouched for.

I would recall this moment months later, after I became familiar with the local human rights community in Córdoba and learned that relationships were far more complicated than they initially seemed at the beginning. At the time of my conversation with Hugo, I had not met the AEPPC members and was concerned about the lack of good relations between them and another group. An archivist from the National Security Archives in Washington, D.C. had warned me how challenging maintaining relationships with Argentine human rights groups could be. The strained relationship between Familiares and the AEPPC had both ideological and personal roots. Some believed it was due to the guilty status of ex presos; others believed it had to do with the way each organization ran its activities.

### **May 23, 2008 – First Meeting with the AEPPC**

Right before I moved to Córdoba, I met several members of the AEPPC for the first time in Buenos Aires. Groups of ex presos from around the country had traveled to the capital to visit Memory Park and the recently memorialized CCD known as ESMA and to attend the fourth national conference for ex presos. ESMA stands for the *Escuela de Suboficiales de Mecánica de*

*la Armada* or the Navy Petty-Officers School of Mechanics, and is emblematic of the state terrorism that occurred during the last military dictatorship. According to Sara, this particular conference was extremely significant for the movement:

You know that we have been fighting because in reality they [the Argentine government] never did anything since democracy was restored until today, and we have convened as the Association of Former Political Prisoners starting five years ago, since 2003, and we have been asking for interviews, interviews with the Secretary of Human Rights, interviews with the government, interviews with Representatives, interviews with... and nobody received us, and nobody received us, until recently when we went for the national conference, to the last national conference. And we had an interview with Sr. Duhalde, because in reality we had become stronger, the National Commission of Former Political Prisoners. There we told Duhalde that the national memory doesn't hold up, that it is missing the former political prisoners. That these sites of memory are lacking in that there are no former political prisoners, who had been held there (Interview SW, 8/28/2008).

Even just three months later, Sara said that the trip to the capital in May 2008 was a huge success. The AEPPC members, for the first time, felt validated having being officially recognized by Eduardo Luis Duhalde, the country's national secretary of human rights. As Sara explained, the ex presos had been meeting since 2003 but they were not able to gain an audience with any major political figures. During the development of memorialized spaces, the ex presos felt left out of the planning and development process—an exclusion that was particularly frustrating, in light of the fact that the ex presos were the only ones who had actually experienced what it was like to be held in these CCDs. The AEPPC had been seeking a more public and explicit role in memorialization efforts and at the fourth national conference, the national movement of ex presos had gained sufficient momentum and numbers that, Sara believed, the Secretary of Human Rights had to begin paying them attention.

Although not all ex presos could attend the private meeting with Duhalde, many of them still attempted to visit the offices of various representatives in hopes of gaining support for legislation that would award economic reparations to ex presos. A meeting was called at the

headquarters of Familiares in Buenos Aires for the ex presos from Córdoba to prepare for they're lobbying visits. Having already visited the office and met Hugo, I attended this meeting in order to introduce myself to Sara in person. We had been communicating for over a year over email. After meeting Sara, one of the women with her looked at me sharply and asked Sara, in the lyrical, drawling accent that I would come to recognize as unique to the province of Córdoba, “¿Quién es ella? ¿Por qué esta aquí?” (Who is she? Why is she here?) Sara laughed, and I was immediately uncomfortable. Smiling like an idiot, I looked to Sara for help. Sara turned to the woman and said, “*Ella va a colaborar con nosotros. Ya les dije sobre ella—una estudiante de Estados Unidos quien vino con beca para realizar su tesis con la Asociación.*” (She's going to collaborate with us. I told all of you already about her—the student from the United States who has a grant to develop her dissertation with the Asociación.) Unimpressed the woman turned and walked away. I was not discouraged. Although the woman did not welcome me or even introduce herself, at least she did not ask me to leave. At that point in the research, I took it as a positive sign. While this very petite and fiery woman canvassed the other ex presos in the room about their plans to meet back at the hotel, Sara turned to me and said, with a smile and a raised eyebrow, “*Es Alicia.*” (That's Alicia.)

Alicia Staps's chilly reception toward me was understandable; ex presos have little or no reason to trust outsiders. When meeting anyone—ex preso or not—they want to know if they can trust that person, or if they should be suspicious. They had only just created this space for themselves, a group exclusively for ex presos and, I, of course, was not yet part of the community.



## November 6, 2008 – First Understanding of the Import of Legal Status to AEPPC

July 20 is “Friends Day” in Argentina. Two months after my arrival in Córdoba, the AEPPC invited me to have *locro* (a traditional meat and vegetable stew) with them at one of the ex presos’ homes, just outside of the city center. At the gathering, I spoke at length with Alicia—the same woman I met in Buenos Aires, the one who was initially unenthused about my presence. By that point, she regularly dispensed advice and opinions to me, and this conversation was about the existing records of survivor testimonies. Alicia exclaimed that there were no such archives for ex presos and proposed that I do something about it. With Alicia’s approval and encouragement, I suggested the idea of creating an oral history archive for ex presos in Córdoba. I asked Alicia if she would bring it up at the next meeting and seek approval from the rest of the members. (Being Alicia, she instead forced me to bring it up in the meeting and explain the project. Fortunately, everyone still agreed.)

A few months later, after initiating the oral history project, I interviewed Alicia. While I often conducted the interviews at the Archive or the Provincial Ministry of Human Rights, Alicia invited me to her home on November 6, 2008. I took a small bus from the city center and rode for an hour and a half, and then walked another half-mile to find Alicia’s home. After a brief tour of her house, we sat down at her kitchen table.

As I did in all other interviews, I asked Alicia why the AEPPC formed several decades after the fall of the dictatorship. Several had already offered me a short explanation, “*Nos organizamos en 2007 para luchar por la justicia.*” (We organized in 2007 to struggle for justice.) The majority directed me toward Sara for an answer, because she was one of three women who had been actively involved in bringing ex presos together as a group at the

beginning. (The other two women were no longer involved in the AEPPC and I did not have the opportunity to meet either of them.)

In addition to asking the ex presos why and how they came to organize, I also asked them why they felt the need to petition for *personería jurídica* (legal status) from the government to establish a formal organization in 2007. The group was established in 2003 as an informal group; why didn't they continue operating that way? Each ex preso would explain that with this legal status, they could now request and receive state funding for conferences and travel, submit resolutions, and participate in public rallies and forums as a state-recognized group. Obtaining *personería jurídica* also clearly marked a transition for the ex presos who went from having informal gatherings to having an institutionalized organization with a constitution and a formal relationship with the government. For the ex presos, most of whom were former members of revolutionary groups, this kind of organizing—with *personería jurídica*—was a departure from their previous grassroots activism. They had in the past worked in opposition to the government. For some members, this was an ideological problem for the organization—and one that emerged in the many debates and discussions that took place at weekly meetings and at cafes after the meetings.

Alicia, however, was the only one who offered a more elaborate explanation on how the AEPPC decided to petition for *personería jurídica*. It had to do with the Provincial Commission and Archive for Memory of Córdoba (referred to as simply the “Archivo”), a new space for memory proposed under Law 9286 in 2006. The Archivo was to be housed in a former detention center in the center of the city of Córdoba, and the only way for the AEPPC to be eligible to become a member of this new umbrella organization would be to obtain *personería jurídica*.

But because they lacked that official status, the ex presos were initially excluded from the organizations associated with the future Archive, and Alicia remembers precisely when she found this out.

Before the AEPPC was formed, Alicia joined Familiares. So did Sara who, Alicia said, “did not have any family members [who were disappeared] but had a boyfriend who was kidnapped—Nona D’Ambra” (Interview AS 11/6/2008). Sara and Alicia quickly became friends, and Alicia soon immersed herself in the organization and its activities, just as Sara did. One day, in 2006, while she was at the Familiares’ office, Alicia remembers a meeting where Martín Fresnada<sup>17</sup>, one of the lawyers representing Familiares in bringing former military officials to trial in Córdoba and the son of two disappeared parents, announced that legislation was underway for the creation of the Archivo. Martín knew that the new law would be approved. “After he recited the law’s contents, they all stood up applauding, while I sat still like this,” said Alicia, sitting across from me with her back straight, her body tense, and her hands gripping the edges of her chair (Interview AS, 11/6/2008). She continued:

Sara stood up, applauded—the whole world did. Sara said, ‘Yes!’ But she hadn’t realized what was going on because if she had, she would have reacted in the same way that I did. I remained still like this, and then the ‘yeast started to rise.’ I waited for Martín to go upstairs and then I went after him. I followed him up the stairs and said to him, ‘Explain to me something: Why aren’t the former political prisoners in the Commission for Memory?’

‘Because you don’t have it.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Personería jurídica.’

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<sup>17</sup> President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner appointed Dr. Martin Fresnada as Argentina’s new Secretary of Human Rights, after the sudden death of Dr. Eduardo Luis Duhalde, in May 2012.

‘What did you say?’ I said to him, ‘If all of you [H.I.J.O.S.] don’t have personería jurídica, then you aren’t included either. H.I.J.O.S. can’t use the same one as the Familiares.’

‘Yes, but it’s different. We are under the Familiares’—you all have nothing, you are a commission that meets but you don’t have any kind of organization’ (Interview AS, 11/6/2008).

According to Martín, the AEPPC was not named as a member of the Archivo because the ex presos lacked legal status. Alicia said that technically H.I.J.O.S. should not be named either, because they also lacked personería jurídica. But Martín said that Familiares and H.I.J.O.S. have a joint legal title as one organizational entity. Up until the point at which the Archivo was created, there was no particular need for ex presos to petition for legal status. The ex presos were political activists, not an institution, or at least not one affiliated with the state; they had relied upon their previous organizing methods to support labor unions, trials, and their own memory projects. The ex presos spoke at local schools and shared their personal experiences as individual volunteers, not through any formal organization. The state had never required survivors to be a part of any legal group to contribute testimonies to the 1984 truth commission report, nor did the government demand such before paying out economic reparations to survivors in the 1990s. Alicia explained her reaction to Martín:

Then at that point, I got real angry and it set me off, because I said to him, ‘Your father and your mother did not need a law or legal status to give birth to you and dedicate themselves to fighting the system, and I don’t either. I don’t need legal status to be an activist!’ I was terrible, really terrible, but it incensed me. It made me lose my temper—because I didn’t talk to him calmly: ‘Your father and your mother didn’t need legal status to...’ A big blowup ensued—I was crying. Martín was crying, the two of us were crying. And then Sara came and the HIJOS kids started in on the fight. I insulted everyone—I was furious. I told them, ‘Who do you think you are? We are the survivors. We have the memories that you depend on—we are the memory, and we are not in the Commission of Memory. How can you do this to us, you filthy brats?! You didn’t consider us, even though you know it’s us.’ Look, I told them all of this when I was really angry, I was so furious. I went downstairs and when I went below, everybody was there, they and the

whole world was *chocho*.<sup>18</sup> I called, ‘Sara.’ I grabbed Sara. ‘Come here—did you see what just happened?’

And she said to me, ‘What? Why are you like this?’

And I told her, ‘Did you not see that they didn’t put us, the former political prisoners?’

‘Of course,’ she said to me, ‘Yes, of course I realized.’

A lie—because clearly she hadn’t realized, or she would have responded the same way. Only in that moment, did she come to her senses and said, ‘Alright, but stay calm—we’re going to see what we can do about it.’ No, it wasn’t something to remain calm about! (Interview AS, 11/6/2008)

In recounting the fight she had with Martín, Alicia revealed how lacking *personería jurídica* would have excluded them from being part of the Archivo. Alicia found this to be incredible since, she argued, the *ex presos* are the witnesses who provide testimonies that make up the content of the archive. The *ex presos* believe that, as survivors, they have a right, or a sense of ownership over the stories or memories told in the archive, or any other memorialized space where a CCD once stood.

Once, during a break from a special presentation on concentration camps in the Holocaust at the Archivo, the staff workers and a handful of *ex presos* were standing around smoking cigarettes. The *ex presos* began sharing a few memories they had of life in the Argentine camps, comparing particular elements with what they had just heard. A week later, one of the *ex presos* who was a part of this conversation, Mario Paredes, remarked to me that this conversation made him realize the importance of *ex presos*. He said that unlike the members of Familiares and H.I.J.O.S., the survivors can pass on memories that cannot be found in documents or in the building’s structure. *Ex presos*, Mario said, can tell people how long they made a single piece of

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<sup>18</sup> *Chocho* refers to the state of being when an outburst of several minor details ends up producing a lot of drama. The word is often used pejoratively to refer to old people with poor mental health.

bread last while they were detained. These details can only come from direct witnesses. Other human rights activists can talk about a place and the crimes committed there – but even these facts are known only because the survivors have passed on their own first-hand knowledge. How the survivors ate and what they felt while being detained—these are memories that only survivors can tell.

The Archivo is housed in the location of the former police intelligence center known as “D2.” In an effort to cast doubt on the testimonies of survivors, the police altered the architecture of the building. So, in order to understand how the space appeared during the dictatorship and how it was once used, the human rights community relied upon survivors to explain the military and police’s uses of the space. Many of the ex presos were tortured and held at D2 and for that reason are today able to describe how they entered the building, and can identify the rooms where they were held before and after their torture sessions. Yet, officially, the AEPPC was not a part of the Archivo even though most of the group’s members were once held as prisoners there and those prisoners had provided the testimonies that help to narrate the space.

After this incident, Alicia said that a group of compañeros initiated the process of gaining legal status, which they were subsequently granted in 2007. (The resolution that created the Archivo passed into law in 2006.) Still, aside from being a part of the Archivo, I pressed further on why the AEPPC needed its own particular official organization, rather than working through Familiares, like H.I.J.O.S. When I asked Alicia, she said:

Why? Because they had to get together in order to collect their indemnifications and they [the government] had never done anything for the compañeros. That is something that the rest of the human rights organizations—this is an excellent question—threw in our face and told us, ‘When we the mothers were doing activism and making rounds around the Plaza de Mayo, and the kids in H.I.J.O.S. organized, the Abuelas organized to reclaim their grandchildren, you were doing nothing.’ It’s very simple, because they weren’t prisoners, neither tortured, nor persecuted, nor disappeared; they were the family members, not [the disappeared], they weren’t looking for them, they had jobs, they had

lives, they had a family, they had one desaparecido, or two, let's say but had a full life. With us, they destroyed our families. They took away our identities. We couldn't get jobs. We led persecuted lives. We were forced to live clandestinely, hiding ourselves, the majority of us were discriminated against for having been guerillas or political prisoners, for what happened to us, for being kidnapped, or whatever it was they came for, they persecuted us from all sides. They came after us with sticks; with sticks they beat us up from all sides—How were we going to organize under these conditions, if the only thing we could do is save our lives? (Interview AS, 11/6/2010).

As Alicia articulated in her interview, the ex presos were in a very different position from the rest of the human rights groups. They alone had to deal with the effects of torture and cope with the fear of being taken again. Rebuilding their lives entailed finding work, re-acquainting themselves with their own family members and trying to repair what had been broken. When they were released they continued to face military and police threats; unlike the family members of the disappeared, the ex presos were not equally able to searching for the missing.

Moreover, the survivors were released into a world that was suddenly foreign. The world was literally different in some ways: the currency had changed in appearance and value, leaving some just-released ex presos unable to put together the correct bus fare to get home. Their worlds were different: Babies had grown up and could walk and talk. Some of their spouses had moved on to other partners; many others who remained faithful were transformed by the experience of being forced to live alone. Their parents were older and traumatized by having almost lost their children. Their neighbors no longer wanted to associate with them for fear of being accused of subversion by association. Former employers also refused to rehire former political prisoners to avoid having trouble in their workplaces.

The ex presos who became involved in the relatives-based human rights organization did not lobby for their own needs, even when they most needed financial and social support, because to be alive was enough, and everything else (i.e. problems with money, health, family, etc.) were secondary to the permanent disappearance of others. Thus, for Alicia to be accused, along with

her fellow *compañeros*, of not having done anything while the rest of the human rights groups were organizing around *desaparecidos* is particularly cruel, and inaccurate. For the *ex presos*, their political activism is what landed them in the prisons; it is the reason they were tortured and it is why they lost their *compañeros*. Many also resumed their leftist activities in labor unions, community organizations, art, and political organizations. They came out of the prisons beaten down, tortured, starved, deprived, and scared—and they were expected to fight for the *desaparecidos*, and many did. But no one was actively fighting to help the *ex presos*—not even the *ex presos* themselves.

Alicia's story about the AEPPC's motivation to obtain *personería jurídica* reflects the division between the relatives-based human rights groups and the survivors. While both Sara and Alicia engaged in activism with *Familiares*, they were nearly left behind in the formation of the *Archivo*. During the time I spent with the AEPPC, the local law that stipulated the creation of the *Archivo* was changed in 2009 to incorporate the *ex presos*; the revision granted them part of the monthly stipend that was given to the other human rights groups.<sup>19</sup>

### **Remembering the past in three phases: comparing archives to the *ex presos***

To better understand why *ex presos* were initially seen as victims, only to be demonized, and then later granted victim status again, it is important to place the *ex presos*' non-linear trajectory in historical context. And as *ex presos* play an increasingly important role in memory construction and trials, they gain more agency over how they are represented in the nation's

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<sup>19</sup> The other human rights groups that were officially part of the archive are: *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* filial Córdoba, *Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas*, H.I.J.O.S., *Servicio de Paz y Justicia*, *Universidad Nacional de Córdoba*, *Poder Ejecutivo*, *Poder Legislativo*, and *Poder Judicial*. The *Asociación de Ex Presos* was added later, after they received *personería jurídica*.



history. But previously, the state exercised a far greater degree of influence over the narrative-making process. To appreciate the changes over time, we must start by examining what the state's priorities were in relation to the dictatorship and the transitional justice process that followed. One of the ways by which we can examine these priorities is to look at archives that contain official documents produced in the course of, in anticipation of or in response to legal proceedings and major events. These documents that were collected over time reflect the status of legal procedures as well as the priorities of the human rights movement.

The internationally recognized and best-organized archive pertaining to the dictatorship is housed in the *Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales* (Center for Legal and Social Studies [CELS]) located in Buenos Aires. CELS was founded in 1979 in response to the dictatorship. The purpose of the organization was to stop human rights abuses by documenting violations, particularly those considered to be instances of state terrorism, and in providing legal aid to families searching for desaparecidos and illegally detained prisoners. As a non-governmental organization, CELS continues to promote human rights and democracy in Argentina through its research and promotion of public policies. The CELS archive has been consulted by domestic and visiting scholars and it is, unlike some others, comprehensive, organized, and accessible.

Valeria Barbuto, one of the main archivists and scholars at CELS, explained to me that the materials pertaining to the last military dictatorship at CELS are divided into three time periods. The first period covers the entire military dictatorship, from its official beginning in 1976 until its end in 1983. The archival materials from this period consist mostly of human rights group literature and legal files that document human rights abuses and report the existence of secret concentration camps. Some of the most important documents from this period were written outside of the country by international human rights groups, such as the Organization of

American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Amnesty International. These international human rights groups published reports based on their on-site visits that had been prompted by testimonies from Argentine exiles living in Europe or the U.S. These published reports attracted international media attention and put pressure on the dictatorship to decrease the number of disappearances. The archival materials during this period are early assessments and therefore do not attest to the complete scope of the military's structure and crimes.

The second archival period starts with the fall of the dictatorship in 1983 and ends in 1989. Included are testimonies from survivors attesting to the highly developed and systematic network of CCDs. At the time, approximately 390 CCDs had been identified. These documents were crucial to the early efforts by the government to establish the facts surrounding human rights abuses. A year after the publication of *Nunca Más*, the 1985 trials against the junta leaders were televised, albeit without sound. The transcripts of the trial were made available in a special weekly publication, *El Diario del Juicio* (The Trial Newspaper), which sold 200,000 copies each week (Phelps 2004:64). Copies of this newspaper are found at CELS.

The third archival period begins in 1990 and continues to the present. The election of Carlos Menem in 1989 brought about a major shift in the transitional justice process. While President Alfonsín pioneered a comprehensive transitional justice strategy through the truth commission and trials, Menem adopted a reconciliatory approach by granting presidential pardons in 1989 and 1990. In addition to his pardons, Menem also passed reparation laws granting set sums of money to the families of the disappeared and to former political prisoners. During this era of impunity, the group H.I.J.O.S. emerged and developed a new protest tactic called *escraches*, a word that comes from Argentine slang that means “to uncover” or “to reveal

to the public.” These escraches involved identifying known military officers and staging protests outside of their homes. As a result, H.I.J.O.S. became known for its popular saying, “*Cuando no hay justicia, hay escraches*” (“When there is no justice, there are escraches.”) Meanwhile, other human rights groups engaged in memory-related projects, from organizing art shows to publishing memorial newspapers to establishing marches. By keeping memories of the past in the public eye, human rights groups continued to pressure the government to renew trials against former military officials.

Other documents from this period found in the CELS archive include copies of resolutions turning over the property rights to former CCDs to human rights groups for transformation into Spaces for Memory. These CCDs were identified by survivors and human rights groups in the 1990s, and between 2000 and 2006, The Chief of the Government of Buenos Aires Aníbal Ibarra began the process of identifying former CCDs in Buenos Aires, and turned over property rights of these spaces to human rights groups for memorialization purposes. Barbuto commented several times on the tensions between the provinces and the capital, because most of the post-dictatorship work on memory, justice trials, and reparations has been confined to the capital.

The history of these three periods, as presented by the documents collected in the CELS archive, provide the background for stories the ex presos told about their own experiences over the last 35 years. These documents, produced by governmental and non-governmental bodies, also illustrate how the ex presos have been perceived over that time. Barbuto divided that historical arc into three distinct periods and so did ex presa Ely Eichenberger<sup>20</sup> at a Provincial

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<sup>20</sup> Ely is a former political prisoner who was imprisoned on August 19, 1976 and released at the end of 1979. She is 63 years old, and was a member of the Communist Party, an artist, and a self-described PRT sympathizer.

Conference for Former Political Prisoners held in Córdoba in February 2009. But in her description of the way Argentine society—including the groups that make up the country’s human rights movement—has viewed ex presos, Ely differed from Barbuto in a few significant ways. As Ely presented Argentina’s recent history through the eyes of an ex preso, it was clear from their verbal and non-verbal cues that the other AEPPC members present at the meeting agreed with her account of that history. They nodded, sighed, and made affirmative side comments. I asked Ely to repeat this condensed history during her interview.

While the boundaries of the first historical period in the CELS archive match the official dates when the dictatorship assumed and lost power, Ely tells a story of that first period that both begins years earlier and ends (somewhat) later. Ely starts the first phase when activists first began being hunted down by the military, and she says it ended with the initial efforts of Alfonsín’s government to address the crimes committed under the dictatorship—namely CONADEP and the 1985 Trial: “Well, since the seventies until the eighties, ‘83, let’s say, we were—or ‘85—the ugly, the bad, and the dirty. That is, we were the fucking guerrillas, that we were the ones who put the country in crisis, etc. etc.” (Interview EE 10/28/2008). Ely’s story reflects the twin facts that (a) political violence preceded the 1976 takeover and, (b) many people who part of the dictatorship remained in positions of power after 1983. Indeed, from the perspective of an ex preso, it makes sense to start that first phase at the beginning of the 1970s, when Isabel Peron’s government first began piloting concentration camps and executing leftist leaders. The country held the ex presos responsible for the violence that ensued throughout the 1970s, which then escalated into the coup d’etat—as Ely said, for most Argentines, they were the ugly, the bad and the dirty. The military dictatorship may have officially declared a war against Communism in 1976, but the same individuals had been using their control over the media to

cover up executions that began taking place much earlier. Several strikes by laborers and students contributed to the increasingly violent atmosphere, and the police and the military responded with force, most likely in the hopes of quelling civil unrest. But many reports of guerrilla attacks were fabricated, and behind the scenes, the Argentine Anti Communist Alliance was hunting down leftist leaders and executing them in secret detention centers. In retaliation, however, small guerrilla groups responded with their own violent actions (See Robben 2005b). And by 1976, the broader population was generally not fully supportive of the leftist, guerrilla movement, and stood firmly against the parts of the movement that called for violent, revolutionary change. Argentine society had been terrorized to such an extent that everyone was living in fear, and to many, life under military rule—with its promises of law and order—seemed a good option. Many people, in an isolationist act of self-defense, shunned anything political and avoided affiliating with questionable institutions, opposition parties, and suspected people. By not having any “dangerous” associations, people felt protected. Anyone who was taken was immediately lumped along with the “fucking guerillas.”

Ely describes the second period as a radical change from being terrorists to being helpless victims: “Afterward came another phase that was the phase of the organizations, where we were the poor, pathetic ones who the military tortured (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).” Ely is referring to the period in which the family-based human rights groups dominated the transitional justice process and utilized a human rights framework. As presented in documents found in the CELS archive, the period between 1983 and 1989 was the time in which the major transitional justice efforts took place: the 1984 truth commission report, the 1985 trials of the military junta leaders and guerrilla leaders, and the 1986 and 1987 “impunity laws.” Ely continued, “After this came the idea, the theory of the two demons. That is, the military was bad because we had been bad.

That is, we returned to being the ugly, the bad and the dirty” (Interview EE, 10/28/2008). The desaparecidos were positioned as innocent victims, and the guilty ex presos were silenced.

The CELS archive identified the third historical period as the one during which memorialization efforts began. The last two decades, starting in 1990, have also seen a major change in policy over punitive trials. Memorials—created from the perspective of victims—kept popping up and the dialogue about the past kept expanding. Survivors began publishing their own accounts in the late 1990s and 2000s, and, with the support of President Nestor Kirchner and his wife, President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, Ely said the ex presos sought a middle ground: “And I think, this is the time, in that the—we, the former political prisoners, have to position ourselves in a different place. That is, we are not innocent. We had a project for the country...[W]e had a lot of force, and really we had an economic and social and political proposal” (Interview EE, 10/28/2008). In the first two historical periods, Ely recognized that she and her fellow ex presos had been defined by society at large; in the ongoing third period, Ely and others had the chance to engage in self-representation for the first time. Ely understood that the solution was not to portray themselves as innocent youth, but to reclaim their political identities. Because in the aftermath of the dictatorship, ex presos were not part of any visible organization or collective; they had not asserted themselves into the public scene, particularly since they were already stigmatized. With the overturning of the amnesty and the prosecution of former military officials, and two successive presidents expressing their support for human rights, more space opened for the ex presos to not only organize but to also lobby for positions at Spaces for Memory. In Córdoba, the ex presos believed themselves to be the ideal candidates to act as tour guides at the memorialized CCDs. As they gain these positions, the ex presos have

been able to present themselves in their dual roles, both as victims of state terrorism and as political militants.

According to Ely, in these three phases survivors went from being the ones who were seen to be at fault for the violence that ensued during the dictatorship, to being the pathetic, innocent victims described in human rights reports, to once again being the ones held responsible for the violence. Only now, two decades into the ongoing third phase, are they attempting to present themselves as both victims of state terrorism and committed militants. This project of defining themselves in the current historical and social environment resembles the challenges that Saba Mahmood (2002) found in the women's mosque movement in Cairo. In analyzing the notions of freedom and agency for women involved in the Islamic revival movement in Cairo, Mahmood suggests that "we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of *subordination* enable and create" (2002:210). In other words, rather than defining agency in terms of resistance to norms—as discussed by Judith Butler—we can also define it within the context that creates the possibility:

[I]f the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and cultural specific (both in terms of what constitutes "change" and the capacity by which it is effected), then its meaning and sense cannot be fixed a priori, but allowed to emerge through an analysis of the particular networks of concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity (2002:212).

Specifically, Mahmood suggests that we understand women's participation in the movement not as false consciousness or a process of being socialized, but rather that women being agents, having desires and motivations that may be at odds at what an outsider might regard as liberatory or not. Women can exert control even when they are acting within the structure of religion.

Similarly, the ex presos' identification as victims of state terrorism could be read as giving up their identity as agents as they conform to the current cultural and political paradigm of human rights and transitional justice: one must be a victim to be a beneficiary of government reparations. It can also be seen as instrumental—as the real reason for their claim to victimhood. Or, if adopting Mahmood's analytic approach to agency as “not only as the capacity for progressive change, but also, importantly, as the capacity to endure, suffer, and persist” (2002:217), then we can see the ex presos' recent admission that they were victimized by the military as a form of agency. Historically, the ex presos were not given the capacity to claim victim status because they were seen to have been partly responsible for the violence. By assuming this role now as victims, the ex presos are not entirely giving way to the image of the “poor, pathetic ones” but rather trying to uphold the human rights narrative that the state was wrong and that the people they disappeared were victims of state terrorism—all the while maintaining the view of themselves primarily as militants. The ex presos are able to “endure, suffer, and persist” in their roles as victims for serving the greater cause against the military dictatorship. In other words, the ex presos are not passively accepting the role of victim actively, not passively, and are doing so by assuming the role while, in the same breath, stating, their continued militancy.

During the military dictatorship, the ex presos were in prison for being the “fucking guerrillas,” and the media propaganda only furthered the misconception that a war existed between armed militants and the military in the streets. During this period, family members, civil society groups, and human rights organizations began collecting evidence and reporting disappearances. When human rights group began protesting, especially during the initial transitional justice efforts, they did not explore the nuances of the political identities of victims.



They wanted to emphasize the fact that they were looking for victims, and for this reason, as Ely describes them, the ex presos were the “poor pathetic ones.” CONADEP reported on gruesome torture methods, the executions and mass graves, and inhumane prison conditions. In this light, it makes sense that the survivors were seen as passive, rather than as political militants.

Barbuto dates the beginning of the third phase to the 1990s, when Ibarra began transforming former CCDs into memorialized sites. Ely’s third phase—the phase of self-representation, of dual identity—does not begin for ex presos at the same time as it did in Barbuto’s narrative. While the victim-centered narrative—as exhibited in many memorials—started to emerge in the 1990s, the AEPPC did form until 2007. In the years between 1990 and 2007 the national government shifted left and strengthened its support for human rights. It was within this context, as new memorials were established and evidence of human rights abuses was being uncovered, that the political space for ex presos opened up for the first time. In the current environment, with official governmental support for renewed trials against former military officials alone and the formal establishment of CCDs as state-recognized physical forms of evidence of *tortura y exterminio* (torture and extermination) ex presos have begun to feel that they have a place in the human rights community. By forming organizations of ex presos, starting in 2007, these survivors are able to define their victim status, to clarify the meaning of their militancy, to position themselves within the broader human rights movements, and to claim their right to participate in memorials and trials as survivors.

### **Memorialization and Representation**

In her book, *The Performance of Human Rights in Morocco* (2005b), Susan Slyomovics demonstrates that even without official recognition from the government or police that human

rights abuses occurred or are occurring, activists can perform human rights through a variety of cultural and political acts, including public testimony, vigils, and storytelling, and thereby brings attention to their causes. Ex presos have increased their public presence by continually performing human rights through their testimonies, rallies, and involvement in local, provincial, and national politics. At the same time, the turns in the transitional justice process in Argentina and the recent formation of the national movement of ex presos have influenced the victim status of ex presos.

In this current phase of transitional justice, the ex presos have gained more visibility and victim status as they have become better organized, have participated in memory projects and have testified and otherwise supported trials. However, as they become involved with the other human rights groups, they also face two main obstacles. First, they must reorient themselves within this new era—in which human rights is the paradigm in which to frame local agendas, a model that no longer fits with the Marxist narratives of social change they once held. Without the same political community that existed in their youth, the ex presos were forced to create a new political bond based on their shared identity as survivors. With every official stance the organization takes on an issue, with every public demonstration or march, and with every event at which one or more members of the AEPPC stands as a representative or speaks to the public, the ex presos further develop their own political positions.

Yet, like any individual or group, the ex presos do not have the ability to fully control their representation because outside actors are also framing the narrative of Argentina's past and the collective agenda for the majority of human rights groups. The ex presos view themselves as militants but in order to gain government benefits, such as reparations, they must first and foremost be victims of human rights abuses: "Victim status is indeed something to which people

aspire... Victimhood gives you grounds to complain, to protest, to make demands, and others just have to respond, or else cut off relations entirely” (Todorov 2003:143). The challenge before ex presos is this: to remain both militants and victims of state terrorism, they must retain their militant identity despite their desire and need to be also considered as victims. They must view themselves as morally correct, though they are demonized by society-at-large as guerrillas, found guilty of fomenting violence, and are therefore seen less sympathetically than other recipients of any state compensation. The ex presos seek to join the larger human rights movement, but not all members of those groups accept the ex presos. But some survivors serve an important purpose in testifying in cases against the former military officials and they tell the story of spaces of memory because they were there, and the families were not.

The ex presos argue amongst themselves because, although they are united by the fact that they were all once imprisoned, they do not necessarily share the same political views or opinions on what the future of the social movement should be—or should not dare to be. They also did not have the same experiences in prison or share the same realities in their post-release. This more complicated positioning, history, and context do not fit neatly in the human rights framework of good vs. bad or of perpetrators vs. victims: “Like the discourse of development, the human rights literature draws upon Manichean dualisms (violated/violator; powerless/powerful) to construct its subjects as innocent victims” (Wilson 2009:215).

What makes it increasingly difficult is that the majority of the ex presos in Córdoba see themselves, first and foremost, as belonging to a labor movement. Córdoba is the birthplace of workers’ resistance, or at least its primary site, and many AEPPC members saw themselves as part of the Third World Movement. Only two of the members were part of the Communist Party. One member views herself as simply an artist who got swept up along with the other

subversives. The ex presos involved themselves with their separate interests after their release—they were part of labor unions, of community organizations, and education—all of which they saw as a form of activism. Yet today as they form a group, and join the human rights community, they are collapsed into the victim figure: “In particular human rights texts construct the category of ‘victim’, and many Amnesty International country reports list violations against trade unionists, students, refugees or political activists under the umbrella heading of ‘The Victims’ (Wilson 2009:215). Even as the ex presos see themselves as militants, as survivors, as something more than victims, they do at certain moments occupy a victim identity because they view themselves as people who suffered under the military dictatorship.

The other obstacle ex presos face in crafting a place for themselves in the public arena is dealing with the complicated personal and organizational relations and politics with other human rights groups. One challenge for ex presos is overcoming the suspicion that they are to blame for the disappearance of their compañeros—a prerequisite for being allowed into the moral community that judges who is and who is not a victim. Furthermore, the ex presos face survivor guilt—they cannot answer the question that families of the desaparecidos want to know: Why did they survive while others disappeared? Thus, not only must the ex presos hash out their political positions when each member comes from his or her own unique experience and political ideological backgrounds, but they must also be activists in a new era of human rights, and work with other human rights groups that may or may not be welcoming to them.

The ex presos from Córdoba distinguish themselves from people who were disappeared and worked as collaborators, because they identify themselves as non-collaborators. This denouncement of collaborators has other implications. For the first trial against military officials who had committed crimes in the concentration camp, La Perla, in Córdoba province, the

members of the AEPPC did not participate in the trial because their members had remained blindfolded while they were detained. This distinguished them from collaborators, who had to perform tasks for the military. Their blindfolds were taken off—which meant that they were able to see faces and, three decades later, visually identify perpetrators at trial. Although not all witnesses are collaborators, this distinction emerged in this particular trial against former General Menéndez. And even though the ex presos see their separateness from those who cooperated with their captors as significant, it remains unclear if the rest of the human rights community distinguishes those who saw the perpetrators and can testify from and those who did not cooperate and therefore cannot. Convicting and sentencing former military officials is of paramount importance to other human rights groups; the subtle distinction of who helps make that happen might be less significant. In Córdoba, nonetheless, the position of this particular group of former political prisoners is somewhat unique, because even with a history of bad relations and a marginalized status, they have managed to become a part of the local human rights community. Unlike in Buenos Aires, that community in Córdoba is smaller and, as is the case in smaller towns, establishing personal connections between people can be easier.

Even with their recent growth and successes, the AEPPC members must still negotiate their identities as both victims and militants when telling history in memorialized spaces. The challenge lies in recognizing a multitude of actors: “The historical narrative of an act that is not morally neutral is always slanted, toward good or toward evil; and it always involves at least two protagonists, the subject (or actor) and the object (or acted upon)” (Todorov 2003:142). Ex presos do not tell a neutral story. They oppose the Two Demons Theory in which two equal warring sides are presented, and they also oppose the image of victimhood.

For Jelin, the broader and more significant question is whether the fact that human rights activists and survivors direct the memorialized spaces and determine the narratives told in these spaces effectively excludes the rest of Argentine society from engaging with the past as much as those who were directly affected by the dictatorship do. Jelin's criticism lies in how legitimacy is defined: "if legitimacy for expressing memory of a painful past is socially assigned to those who suffered repression on their own bodies or those of their kin, this symbolic authority can easily (consciously and unconsciously) slip into a monopolistic claim on the meaning and content of memory and truth" (2010:200). Thus, even as ex presos gain a more public voice, Jelin is concerned about limiting the interpretation and feelings of ownership over memorialized sites—particularly when the goal of opening these sites is to promote societal involvement with the past. Jelin raises a valid point about optimizing participation, but I would add that the inclusion of ex presos has the potential to expand social involvement. Ex presos are connected to the disappeared through their shared political thoughts and not through kinship—meaning that ordinary members of society also might be able to relate to the disappeared on grounds other than blood ties. In addition, the AEPPC members are forthright about their militant identities, which automatically complicates the simplified image of innocent victims and enables a discussion about the political motivations of all actors and how these relate to the present political situation in Argentina.

However, ex presos should not be given a voice solely based on their ability to open up the space for others to participate in memorialized spaces, because they, too, are still finding their own stories and determining the contributions they can make to these sites. As witnesses, the ex presos serve an important role in the transitional justice process in Argentina. But their role in trials and truth telling is different in 2011 than it was in 1984. As the revolutionary

frameworks of social change lost their adherents and the human rights framework became adopted by groups in Argentina, the image of militants within radical social movements changed. Yet, just as the political environment and efforts in memory-making developed and changed in favor of the families of the disappeared, the role for survivors also expanded with increased dialogue and more nuanced reflections of the past. The ex presos are, three decades after the end of the dictatorship, finding themselves part of the human rights community, directly involved in the renewal of trials and occupying a place of privilege in newly established Spaces for Memory. They, too, are not the same people they were when they were first released. Their memories and life histories have developed and changed with time, and as they lose compañeros around them, they realize that this is their opportunity to share their memories before they pass away. The silencing of the ex presos and their increasing public role make it even more urgent for us to hear them as memorialized spaces will inevitably be passed along to future generations—to Argentines without a direct relationship to either the disappeared or the memorialized sites.

## Chapter 4

### Family Genealogies of Resistance

Jorge Torteglia's grandfather was a *campesino* (peasant) who was progressive but anti-Communist, but when his son, Jorge's father, learned that the Communist Party had been involved in the agrarian rebellion known as the *Grito de Alcorta* (Cry of Alcorta), he joined the party. *Grito de Alcorta* was the first massive agrarian strike in Argentina's history and took place in the Sante Fe province, in the city of Alcorta, on June 25, 1912. Peasants in Alcorta refused to harvest in protest of their poor working conditions and in demand of fair contracts for the land they worked. In Argentina, the profound poverty of peasants and extreme wealth of land-owning oligarchy dates back to colonial times. The demonstrations sparked by this rebellion spread to other provinces, including Buenos Aires, Córdoba, and Entre Ríos, and led to the formation of the *Federación Agraria Argentina* (the Argentine Agrarian Federation). "If you ask me why I am a Communist, it's because my father saw in Communism that men could be different, they could be equal, that there needn't be misery, poverty," said Jorge (JT Interview, 11/17/2008).

Jorge's father was also a biology professor who was later fired from his lab because of his political commitments to the Communist Party. In fact, both of his parents were committed to teaching children in poor, rural areas, and instilled in Jorge a love for justice. Because of their involvement in the Communist Party, Jorge's parents were forced to live underground with their children to escape imprisonment under previous dictatorial regimes. Still, Jorge followed his father's footsteps and also joined the Communist Party. This genealogy of resistance amongst ex presos is widespread, and yet, this familial connection has not garnered the same amount of attention that the familial ties to the disappeared have in the Argentine human rights movement.



The reason for this silenced history lies in the initial denials of political involvement and resistance in the homes of desaparecidos. The military accused the parents of desaparecidos of having raised subversives and justified stealing children to prevent them from being raised in subversive homes. In response, families of the desaparecidos claimed that they were not involved politically and neither were their children. However, resistance against the conservative sectors of the Catholic Church, oligarchy, and military dictatorships long preceded the last military dictatorship. These family genealogies of resistance not only reflect the ex presos' commitment to structural change—beyond the limited changes of transitional justice processes—but they also critically challenge the more well-known genealogy in reverse: that of desaparecidos giving (political) birth to their parents.

Groups of activists with families ties to the disappeared—most notably the Madres de Plaza de Mayo—played a major role in the organization of resistance against Argentina's last military dictatorship, and much academic work focusing on the period has concentrated on the effectiveness of this politically active mother-child dyad (Malin 1994, Bejarano 2002). Indeed, in Argentina today, connections between relatives still inform and impact the ways in which that period is publicly interpreted and memorialized, and the reemergence of the ex presos introduces another parent-child dyad, one that is in many ways the converse of the better known relationship that helped bring down the dictatorship 30 years earlier. If the Madre-desaparecido relationship featured a present mother who had been activated by her absent child, the ex presos, who attribute their own political identities to their parents' influence, turn this iconic image on its head, in two ways: first, by being present, and second by pointing to their absent parents as the sources of their political activism, both during the dictatorship era and today. And while one could say that the cases are parallel—it was, after all, the activism of one family member that

activated the other—the presence of the ex presos and their stories of their socially and politically engaged parents establishes, in the place of the singular and silent desaparecidos and their suddenly activated mothers, a genealogical model of resistance. These relationships, far from being a simple reversing of the absent and present relatives, are part of a reassertion of political agency by ex presos, not just on their own behalf, but on behalf of their families as well, an act that has important ramifications for both Argentina’s political and historical situations, and the human rights framework.

### **Familial Influences**

The most concrete form of evidence that demonstrates parental influence upon their children is the fact that ex presos joined their parents’ political parties. Sara Waitman, for instance, was once a member of the Communist Party just like her father. Her father, who immigrated from Russia, brought Sara and her twin sister, Laura, with him to the *Asociación Cultural Israelita de Córdoba* (Israeli Cultural Association of Córdoba [ACIC]) when they were nine years old, where many of the members were part of the Communist Party. Sara’s father was also a *luchador* (“an activist”) in the Communist Party who had been imprisoned when she was seventeen. Sara said that her years spent at the ACIC were formative to her political identity:

All of the activities were pioneered by “education for the masses,” you’d say, because they taught you to look at history in a different way, to share this... (pause) at another human level, to be in solidarity. Camp, fieldtrips, expressing yourself through art, singing, painting...(pause)...let’s see...doing puppetry, uh...lots of activities that they didn’t provide at school. It was like looking at life from another perspective, and this helped us a lot (Interview SW, 9/28/2008).

Through the ACIC Sara and Laura grew into their political activism and affiliated with the Communist Party during high school.

In November 1976, the military disappeared Sara and her boyfriend and tortured them at La Ribera, a concentration camp. At the time, Sara was twenty-one and had become a physical education teacher. During her interrogation sessions, she denied being a part of the Communist Party, even as the military officials repeatedly tortured her to force a confession:

I remember one of the times when they took me out [of my prison cell] to threaten me because the Red Cross was coming. In other words, I was held prisoner, as a legal prisoner, they took me again to a concentration camp, I mean, it was a prison—I always say that I was in a semi-clandestine state because there was no security against them from taking you out and killing you or from taking you back to a concentration camp; they tortured you. And I remember them interrogating me if I was a Communist since year “x”, saying, “You became affiliated since year ‘x’; saying, “Your father and your sister are also members of the Communist Party.” I denied it, telling them, “It isn’t so, it isn’t so, it isn’t so” (Interview SW, 9/28/2008).

Despite denying being a Communist, her father would later inadvertently reveal Sara’s party affiliation. In an attempt to free Sara, her father sought out a high-ranking military official, General Santiago. Sara’s father told the General that he and his other daughter were also part of the Communist Party because they believed in “making positive social change” for a “society that is for everyone, equal.” The General replied, “*Ustedes lo comunista son la madre de todos los borregos*” (You all who are Communist are the mother of all the sheep [the ignorant ones who follow mindlessly]) (Interview SW, 9/28/2008).

Sara is no longer a Communist Party member today—since the dictatorship effectively dismantled it in Argentina—but she is an ardent militant in various social and political causes, and believes in the same values of equality and social change that her father championed. Most of Sara’s time is dedicated to efforts that will pass a reparation law for all ex presos in Argentina, support trials against ex military men, and create various educational and social activities for youth. She constantly builds alliances with various unions and leftist activist groups, joining them in marches and in election campaigns. No particular political ideology can easily be

attached to Sara, but her father's introduction to the ACIC and the Communist Party was instrumental to her development as an activist.

In Sara's case, her father had a direct influence on her political activism, but for others, it was the general environment in which they grew up in that influenced their worldview. Several ex presos explained that their families were middle class and intellectuals who cultivated a free-thinking environment that made them socially and politically aware. Some of them became activists in the militant branches of their parents' political parties, while others became sympathizers with militant groups.

Luis Acosta, another ex preso, attributed his militancy to his upbringing despite never having been part of any specific struggle for any significant period of time. When I asked him if he had belonged to any political groups in his youth, he replied: "*Mas bien estaba siempre en las luchas populares para ser amplio, pero más o menos de izquierda. En algunos casos no porque no compartía algo.* (I was mostly involved in popular struggles for the sake of staying broad, but I was pretty much on the left. I am not in a few cases because I don't agree with something.) (Interview LA, 11/18/2008). Luis explained his personal background in this way:

I come from a middle class home, somewhat wealthy, highly intellectual. My parents had a university level of education. It was more about an atmosphere of political and social contact than coming from a political perspective. I think it was about a Christian commitment. They were Catholic and they felt that the political part was a Christian responsibility to get involved with all social classes, particularly with the poor. That was the family environment I grew up in—a lot of solidarity. I also grew up in a integrated and structured family, without fissures inside the whole family, I'm talking about even second cousins, uncles three times removed, my great aunts and uncles—it's a big family; it was integrated about everything (Interview LA, 11/18/2008).

Luis described his home environment as a place of both intense intellectual debate and evangelical Christianity. His parents were at once progressive and strict, and it was their religion that guided them socially and politically. Perhaps for this reason Luis' later involvement with a

militant leftist group was surprising: “*Es una familia que aún siendo cuestionada desde acá plantearía su apego y orden institucional en el que estábamos, jamás hubieran pensado que un hijo les iba a salir por este lado.*” (It’s a family that although questioned everything from its commitments to the institutional order that we were living in, they also had never thought that one of their sons was going to turn out this way) (Interview LA, 11/18/2008). Luis was a member of the Montoneros, but insisted that he did not belong to any particular political group. When I asked Luis if his parents were Peronistas—since Montoneros was the radical branch of the leftist Peronists—he replied with:

Yes, of course. But in reality I never was and I think it has to do with my family upbringing. My family was Peronist but they didn’t live by it or used it as something to exclude others, nor did we think we were better than others I mean. We, too, had our defects and bad people, questioning from the inside. Well, I was like this too. I am not a follower, before I was, but now I am not a follower of anything and I don’t accept leaders.

Here Luis slightly revises his description of his family by revealing that they were Peronistas, but that they were loosely affiliated. It is possible that Luis’ distance from political parties today has led him to interpret his upbringing as being more generalist as well. Regardless, Luis continues to attribute his political identity then and now to his parents’ approach to poverty and social problems. Christianity and intellectualism shaped how Luis navigated his own way through leftist struggles, joining them without blindly following the party lines. His parents were committed to serving the poor, a value that Luis imbibed in his youth and later years.

Inheriting their parents’ activist leanings meant that Sara and Luis would later be disappeared for adopting “subversive” ideologies and actions.

## **Activism in Prison**

Parental influence on ex presos involvement in politics and their commitment to social justice did not end when they were disappeared. Ex presos continued to show their resistance and solidarity in prison—just as previous political prisoners had in earlier dictatorships. These acts of resistance in prison may have been less visible than the acts undertaken by the madres and abuelas in the plazas around the country, but their defiance was no less an example of family-based resistance.

The parental influence on ex presos also take place within Argentina's long history of rapid successive dictatorships and political repression against different groups. Many parents of ex presos had themselves been the victims of political repression. Thus, the last military dictatorship did not happen suddenly but was the result of a long history of violent political culture and a steady erosion of democratic rights. Systematic disappearances, however, was a new phenomenon.

In order to eliminate their political opposition, the military created an elaborate system that involved several levels of government and civil sectors of society to not only disappear people but to do so without any obstruction. Understanding the experience of ex presos requires knowledge of the state apparatus that allowed the military to disappear, torture, and kill victims. Perhaps the best way to explain what happened to ex presos is by telling the story of Cristina Díaz, an ex presa. I share her story because in many ways it is emblematic of what happened to the other ex presos. In this story, Cristina explains that even before she was disappeared, political violence had already affected her family. For many ex presos, their spouses, friends, and family members were often taken, tortured, and disappeared. In response, ex presos lived underground, hoping to escape the same fate as other militants. The military, however, devoted enormous resources to track and find their victims, and suspended the rule of law in order to

accomplish their task. Eventually, the military found Cristina and she was disappeared, and later put in prison. But like other ex presos, Cristina did not passively accept her kidnapping and imprisonment. She resisted in prison even after she was tortured and knew that she could be killed at any point. Cristina told the story of the Battle of *Bombachas* (Battle of the Panties), one in which many women members of the AEPPC were involved in and symbolized their solidarity with each other. This is how Cristina tells her own story, and though it is uniquely hers, the way she tells it is not dissimilar to the overall structure of what happened to thousands of others.

Shortly before Cristina Diaz was born in 1952, her father, Florencio Díaz, moved from San Nicolas, a small town in the Buenos Aires province, to Córdoba to find work. At the time, Córdoba was the center of industrial production in Argentina. Thousands of workers labored in the city's car-manufacturing plants; Florencio Díaz worked at Fiat, eventually becoming a supervisor, and worked there until he suffered a serious factory accident. A loose screw from a piece of machinery flew into his face, fracturing most of his facial bones. With extensive surgery, he regained sight in one eye, but lost a considerable amount of skin. Still, Florencio, who came from a family of Peronists,<sup>21</sup> remained in the factory and went on to become a union leader within the Fiat factory.

Florencio was involved in unionizing during one of the most important events in the history of Córdoba and Argentina: the 1969 "Cordobazo." For the first time, students and workers joined together in protest and immobilized Córdoba city for days, helping to eventually bring down the military junta leader, General Juan Carlos Organía, who had led a coup d'état in

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<sup>21</sup> Peronists or *Peronistas* were supporters of Peronism, named after General Juan Perón. Journalist Helen Popper offers one of the concise descriptions of Peronism: "Peronism is more a way of doing politics than an ideology and the Peronist or Judicalist Party has long had left-and-right-wing factors. Peronist leaders are often charismatic populists with a pragmatic approach to power" (Reuters, 11/14/2010).

1966. The Cordobazo sparked similar movements throughout the country, and this event came to define Córdoba as the center of revolutionary and intellectual movements—an identity that the city retains even today. The National University of Córdoba was the first university established in Argentina and its students were known for their radicalization.

With the increasing unpopularity and protests, Organía resigned and General Roberto Levingston (1970-1971) continued the military-led “Argentine Revolution,” which opposed liberal democracy and Communism. It was during Levingston’s rule that the federal police detained Cristina Diaz’s father for his labor union activities and involvement with the leftist Peronist movement. He was soon released, but fearful of being detained again, he and his family immediately went underground. After Organía and Levingston, the third military leader Alejandro Lanusse appointed Héctor Cámpora as his succeeding presidential candidate. Lanusse appointed him specifically to prevent Perón from returning to Argentina from his exile in Spain where he had been since 1955. Argentina returned to democratic rule in 1973. Cámpora, however, handed the presidency over to Perón after just two months in office. Before leaving office and appointing Raúl Alberto Lastiri to oversee the transition to Perón, Cámpora also granted a full amnesty (Law 20508) to all political prisoners who had been detained during the 1966-1973 military rule. Those imprisoned were primarily students, banned political party members, and trade unionists. This was a common pattern in Argentina’s history—the transfer of power between democratically elected presidents and military rule—and occurred frequently, ever since the country first gained its independence from Spain in 1816. Political parties in opposition to the government in power were frequently outlawed, and then restored—depending on who was in office. And as repression increased throughout these periods of military rule—



which included targeted killings, forced political exile, bans on particular political parties, and expulsions of intellectuals from universities—armed resistance groups formed in response.

Without a job, Cristina's father bought a small store in 1972 to try to make a living. However, immediately after doing so, the front door of the business was bombed. The family lived in constant fear. Although he was a committed factory worker, Florencio encouraged his daughter Cristina to excel in school. Cristina made a halfhearted attempt, but she abandoned school for factory work. Bent over a machine all day, however, Cristina regretted dropping out of school. And so at the age of 19, Cristina told her father that she wanted to return to primary school. Despite being surrounded by 12-year-olds, Cristina enjoyed returning to school. When she was in high school between the years 1973 and 1975, Cristina became active in the student union.

During the time Cristina was in high school, both the right-wing and left-wing factions of the Peronist party had grown in size and had drifted apart from each other during Perón's exile. When Perón returned to Argentina on June 20, 1973, his left-wing supporters gathered to greet him at the Ezeiza international airport. In a move that had been approved by Perón, snipers from the right-wing faction of his supporters shot into the crowd, killing 13 people and injuring 365 more. Perón's return to power was brief, though; he died only a year later, in 1974. His third wife, María Estela "Isabelita" Martínez, assumed office but was considered by everyone to be ill-equipped, having had no previous political experience, and allowed the head of the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance (Triple A), José López Rega, to take control. Under her brief tenure, the Triple A continued to assassinate leftist political opponents in secret "pilot" concentration camps. Approximately 600-2,000 people were killed during Isabelita's short presidency, and 425 of those killings are directly attributed to the Triple A (Robben 2005b). In reaction, guerrilla

leftist groups adopted a more confrontational strategy that included targeted assassinations and amateur bombs, which contributed to the general chaos that consumed Argentina.

Amidst protests and growing political violence—most of its coming from the side of the Triple A—the military overthrew the government in 1976. The military junta leaders justified their actions stating that they were fighting Communist terrorists. However, even at their height in 1974-1975, there were no more than 2,000 guerrillas, and only 400 of them had access to arms (Feitlowitz 1998:6). Leaders of the revolutionary groups fled the country, and as a result, all of the guerrilla groups were dismantled. Nonetheless, since the country had seen many military juntas come and go, many argue that the general public was relieved that the military stepped in as Isabelita failed to govern and alleviate civil unrest. In previous dictatorships, those who opposed the government were often imprisoned but were eventually released. The last military dictatorship, however, was different.

The Proceso was designed to transform Argentina into a Christian, civilized, and Western nation. Leftists, intellectuals, and others were labeled threats to national security, and anyone suspected of being a “subversive” or someone who prevented this “Process” was disappeared.

In February 1976, one month before the coup d’etat, Cristina’s father was detained at Prison Unit 1 (UP1). His Peronist affiliation and syndicate leadership position were enough to make him a target. To avoid being taken down with her father, Cristina switched schools and finished high school in June 1976. A month later, a group of civilians<sup>22</sup> working with the military went searching for Cristina at her mother’s house. Because Cristina was living

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<sup>22</sup> During the dictatorship, the military dispatched groups of men who were sometimes dressed in uniform or civilian clothing, and their objective was to hunt down their targets through surveillance and large-scale operations. These men were armed and worked with the military and police to kidnap and disappear people with collaboration from nearly all levels of authority, including the justice system.

somewhere else, they took her brother instead. The group of men beat and tortured Cristina's brother in an attempt to force him to divulge his sister's location. But neither her brother nor her mother knew where Cristina lived; Cristina purposely never told anyone her location to protect herself and her family. The same group of civilians went looking for Cristina again on July 8, 1976. In Argentina, July 9 is Independence Day, and since the dictatorship mandated that the day be celebrated at school, Cristina went to her own school's celebration. At the party, her brother appeared in order to alert Cristina that people were looking for her. Cristina responded, "*Bueno, vamos a salir separados. Y vos si ves algo raro, que me detienen o me llevan inmediatamente hagan la denuncia a la justicia, presente un recurso de amparo.*" ("Well, let's leave separately. And if you see something strange, like if they detain me or take me, immediately file a legal complaint, submit an appeal for asylum [on my behalf]" (Interview CD, 12/4/2008).

Cristina then boarded a bus and headed toward her boyfriend's parents' house. After a few days, she traveled to San Nicolas, where her father was born. She went to see her great aunt, and her aunt's sister. Cristina moved around like this for about two years to avoid being caught by the military.

Meanwhile, Cristina's mother was not doing well because of her husband's detainment and fear for her daughter's safety. In October 1976, the military took her husband, Florencio, out of UP1 and executed him, along with five other prisoners. Cristina's mother, who was not involved in anything political, had trouble understanding the events around her. At that point, Cristina was living with her aunt and uncle, but her mother and brother visited her every so often. Eventually, Cristina returned home and hid for two months, never stepping outside. She

eventually became restless and said to her mother, “*Mira esta todo tranquilo, voy a salir a trabajar*” (“Look everything is calm, I’m going to go out and work”).

Cristina found work that same day. Two months later, when she came home after having her molars removed, and in pain, she found her home completely surrounded by a large group of non-uniformed men on all sides, including the roof. She recognized one of the men as her neighbor who lived around the corner. The men took Cristina to Mariano Moreno, a street in the center of the city of Córdoba, where one of the offices of police intelligence—*Departamento de Informaciones* (Information Department), or “D2”<sup>23</sup>. It was September 1978.

When the *grupos de tareas* (“task groups” or “death squads”) detained prisoners in Córdoba, more often than not they took them to D2, where they beat and tortured their captives before deciding where to send them. Some were transferred to one of the *campos de concentración* (concentration camps), such as La Perla or La Ribera; in other cases, like Cristina’s, prisoners were sent to common prisons, like UP1. At the concentration camps, prisoners were considered to have “disappeared” because there was no official record that these places existed, or that they were even detained. Captives were handcuffed and blindfolded, thrown into a car trunk, taken to a hidden location, and then tortured during interrogation sessions. In concentration camps, prisoners remained blindfolded the entire time. Some of these prisoners survived, most died, and others were transferred to other camps or prisons. Common prisons like UP1, particularly at the start of the dictatorship, were not necessarily safer than the concentration camps, as some prisoners were regularly tortured, even executed. When prisoners

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<sup>23</sup> In Córdoba, there were two “D2” locations. One is located on Mariano Moreno and the other is located next door to the town’s cathedral, in one part of the *Cabildo* (the municipal building that dates back to the colonial era of the early Jesuits in the late 1500s. The entryway to this latter D2 is through a cobble-stoned alleyway called *Pasaje Catalina* (Catalina Path).

arrived at UP1, the military did not inform families of any detentions and all forms of legal representation—except the lawyers provided by the dictatorial rulers—were suspended.

The military held Cristina at D2 for 20 days. They kept her blindfolded and handcuffed for the entire period. Still, even though prisoners were prohibited from speaking to each other, she remembered many people passing through the place, and at one point a fellow prisoner sat down next to her and spoke a few words. Cristina lifted her head to see through the bottom of her blindfold that the woman was Marily Pioti. She had been severely beaten by her captors. From D2, the military transferred Cristina to UP1, where her father had been detained and executed two years earlier.

At UP1, Cristina was placed in the 14<sup>th</sup> block, where the political prisoners were held—apart from the common prisoners. To increase her sense of isolation, however, Cristina was placed in a cell even further away from the other political prisoners, in solitary confinement, for three and half months. Cristina had nothing in her cell except a bar of soap, a towel, and a tin milk can. Twice a day, the guards allowed her to empty her tin milk can, to which she urinated and defecated. The guards gave Cristina ten minutes a day to clean herself and her cell. The only interaction she had with other humans was when the guards dropped off her food.

After three and half months, at the beginning of 1979, the guards took Cristina down to the cells where the other female political prisoners were held. When Cristina entered, prisoners who had been held there were taken out and presumably transferred to somewhere else. Many of the women prisoners at UP1 after 1976 were transferred to another prison called Villa Devoto in

the Buenos Aires province. Several former political prisoners were released after being detained in Villa Devoto toward the end of the dictatorship.<sup>24</sup>

During her detention at UP1, Cristina was brought to trial in front of a military tribunal and was represented by a defense lawyer assigned to her by the dictatorship:

I don't know why they believed I had an illicit association with the Montoneros. But, well, they had no proof and I was the only one on trial...there was nothing to say or to defend, you know, in this accusation they made against me. They took me to trial several times. The attorney general gave me 25 years but I ended up with 10 years. After the sentencing, they had me stand underneath a tree for the entire day, with two soldiers guarding me. The defense lawyer came to me a few hours after the sentencing to ask me how I felt and I...I don't know if it was out of repulsion or, you know, thinking that this wasn't happening, said:

'I feel good because I know that I am not staying in prison for ten years.'

'What do you mean that you're not going to be a prisoner for 10 years if you were just sentenced?'

'Yes,' I said, 'But you will all be gone before then.'

Then his face changed. He became nervous and left (Interview CD, 12/4/2008).

Most prisoners never went to trial, but when they did, the courts were more of a performance than anything resembling justice. Cristina's response to her defense lawyer is illustrative of how ex presos narrate their time in prison by recounting memories of resistance against the prison guards. Ely, another ex presa, stated that the purpose of memory today for those who were detained is to speak about their resistance, rather than about torture and the other horrors they endured in prison. Cristina, who could have easily been executed like her father, still retained her ability to resist through her reactions to her captors.

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<sup>24</sup> While the former political prisoners did not recognize any specific patterns for where they were taken to, I noticed that after 1976 they were often taken to D2, then to La Perla and La Ribera, and eventually to UP1, where then men and women were separated and transferred to another concentration camp, or to Villa Devoto if they were women and to Prison Unit 9 ("Unidad 9") if they were men. While torture was heaviest in the beginning and remained throughout the entire detainment at the various places, Villa Devoto and Unidad 9 allowed prisoners to have more interaction and restricted privileges. These two prisons were the last places in the network before ultimately releasing prisoners. However, many died under torture sessions, during the "transfers" from one prison to another, or attempted suicide as their "release."

By that time Cristina was an *ex presa*, not a *desaparecida*, which meant that she had a greater chance of survival. At the time Cristina was imprisoned, however, there was little understanding of how the military operated and what the fate of any individual captive would be. Cristina and those in similar situations still faced a tremendous amount of uncertainty, particularly since the dictatorship denied any wrongdoing against Argentine citizens:

Later in the year '79, the OEA [Organization of American States] came and...[General] Ménendez denied that we were political prisoners because he said that there were no political prisoners in Córdoba. The news had reached us, we knew amongst ourselves...because we had communication with our families through the common prisoners. We found out that our families had been mobilizing...to get the OEA to come and see the prison (Interview CD, 12/4/2008).

Cristina was referring to the OEA's Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' on-site visit in September 6-20, 1979. In response to the increasing reports of disappearances and torture, the OEA arranged a visit for May 1979. The dictatorship delayed the visit, and spent the four intervening months, as they did with the International Red Cross visit, moving prisoners out of places reported by political exiles to be concentration camps and temporarily improved conditions in the common prisons in preparation for inspections. Before visits, the guards informed the prisoners that they would suffer dire consequences if they complained to the human rights inspectors.

Family members were extremely important in building the human rights movement in Argentina. Starting in 1977, the Madres began openly protesting the dictatorship in the May Plaza in front of the presidential palace in Buenos Aires. Other family members formed human rights groups and together with international human rights organizations pressured the dictatorship to inform them of the whereabouts of their children, or at least hold trials before disappearing people. Meanwhile, the political prisoners transmitted messages to their families via the *presos comunes* (common prisoners), who could receive visitors and packages. These

common prisoners helped political prisoners communicate with their relatives by passing messages verbally or secretly passing letters. The families of the former political prisoners paid the common prisoners, and within the prison, political prisoners bartered with the common prisoners, exchanging small goods, such as cigarettes and sugar for money paid by their families, or other goods to get messages to or from the outside.

The OEA released its report based on the investigators' 1979 visits to select prisons on April 11, 1980, and it drew further international attention to the situation in Argentina. Even though it severely underestimated the gravity of the suffering caused by the dictatorship, the OEA report was considered to be extremely damaging for the dictatorship. Until that point, the military junta leaders denied the existence of any secret prisons, reports of torture, executions, and disappearances, and the OEA report uncovered evidence that all of those accusations were indeed taking place.

During their long periods of illegal detention, the prisoners would occupy their time producing things that their family members could sell to people outside the prison. Cristina found numerous ways to create small crafts:

We also took the initiative to work so that our families wouldn't have to spend as much on us. We started to make artisanal goods that our families could later sell. So, it was something that motivated us, you know, sustained us a little. For example, during the period in which I was detained it occurred to me one day to start amassing bread. I dried out biscuits and accumulated it and with saliva I made dough. Then I made little things and they hardened. When they dried they stayed hard but I didn't have anything with which to paint them (Interview CD, 12/4/2008).

This passage reveals how Cristina and other prisoners survived both mentally and physically.

They created objects to not just pass time, but also to support their families even from prison.

This work gave the prisoners a sense of purpose.



In 1980, Cristina and the other prisoners in the 14<sup>th</sup> block were blindfolded and handcuffed, taken from their cells into a truck, and driven to an air force base. They never boarded an airplane, however, and instead were returned to UP1 for another year. This seemingly insignificant episode actually had a grave psychological impact on Cristina. Whenever prisoners were taken out of prison, they never knew if they were going to be executed in a so-called “shoot-out”—premeditated killings that the dictatorship staged in a way to make it appear as if there had been “confrontations” with terrorists—or if they were going to be transferred to a concentration camp for additional intense sessions of torture, or to another prison. When the military eventually transferred Cristina to Villa Devoto, she remembered that by then there were fewer killings—a result of the increased international pressure on the dictatorship to account for human rights abuse allegations. When Jimmy Carter became the U.S. President, political relations changed between the U.S. and Argentina. According to ex presos and declassified documents in the National Security Archive, unlike his predecessor Richard Nixon, Carter demonstrated his disapproval of the dictatorship’s human rights violations by imposing economic restrictions and pressuring the dictatorship to end its practice of disappearances. Ex presos believe that this change in U.S. policy significantly contributed to ending disappearances and executions, and improving some aspects of prison life.

Still, Cristina remembered that even at Villa Devoto the guards kicked and beat the prisoners. Guards practiced psychological forms of torture by depriving prisoners of any sense of control, individuality, or sense of dignity.

But, as Cristina said, the prisoners from Córdoba resisted. She recalled the time she and a group of women prisoners from UP1 arrived in the Buenos Aires province and refused to

submit to humiliating body inspections at Villa Devoto—what is affectionately remembered as the “Battle of the *Bombachas*.”

They inspected us in a bad way and those of us from Córdoba were subjected to one search because of a *compañera*<sup>25</sup> who was later punished.<sup>26</sup> We didn’t lower our *bombachas* for the inspection, we only stretched them a little and we didn’t take off our *corpiño* (bra) either. So there it was different as you had to lower your *bombachas* and we didn’t want to get inspected as we came from Córdoba, from a different way, we said, “No, not us.” So there they beat us with clubs and said, “Here yes, here you have to lower your *bombacha*” (Interview CD, 12/4/2008).

This story is popular among the *ex presas* because it was an instance of solidarity and resistance. Together, they refused to submit to the inspection. It also illustrated the degree to which day-to-day life was full of constant psychological and physical forms of torture, and shows how the guards attempted to take away from prisoners even the most basic amount of control over their bodies. But prisoners found ways to resist, even if it brought them further punishment. Some acts took place out of the view of guards. At Villa Devoto, prison cells had small stoves. Cristina recalled re-preparing the foods brought to them to improve the taste, and having a fellow prisoner who was a physical education teacher instruct them on exercises to perform in their prison cells. All of these small acts of resistance enabled the prisoners to maintain their minds and bodies, even while they were malnourished and cramped into small cells.

Since Cristina’s family had secured several human rights lawyers in her defense, the Supreme Court (albeit one entirely run by the dictatorship) released a statement in the newspaper

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<sup>25</sup> The term *compañero(a)* does not directly translate into English, though often times words like “comrade,” “colleague,” and “partner” are offered. *Compañero* is a word that lies somewhere between friend and fellow militant. In Argentina specifically, the term carries a shared political commitment that comes out of the Peronist movement but is shared widely across the Marxist, Trotskyite, and other revolutionary groups. *Ex presos* call each other “*compañero*”.

<sup>26</sup> Guards often subjected prisoners to invasive bodily inspections, looking for small objects and messages that women hid in their vaginas, and that men and women carried in their anuses. The woman that Cristina referred to was most likely caught and therefore led to the rest of prisoners to inspection.

that she would be released. Cristina's case had been annulled since there was no evidence to convict her. But Cristina was unaware of this announcement; she was sitting in a prison cell and no one bothered to inform her. One day, after four years in prison, in September of 1982, the guards called out her name and she was brought into an office:

They told me that the judge Samboni Ledesma was coming to interrogate me. There was also another lawyer sitting there for me. I don't know how my mom arranged it from the outside. Or the relatives... Well, when the interview began they asked me a series of questions and at the end, I said, "If you grant me permission I would like to speak with you."

"Yes," he said.

"Well, I would like to formally accuse you of being responsible for my father's death." His eyes widened and he said, "How am I responsible for the death of your father? Who was your father?"

"My father was Florencio Díaz," I told him. "He had a trial in Tribunal 1 of which you presided as the judge. A judge then should ensure security, but for the life of a detainee you did not do this. They took my father out of prison and executed him, and so when I am released I am going to initiate a case against you."

He was completely surprised. Everyone was... The secretary, my lawyer [Cristina laughs], everyone (Interview CD, 12/4/2008).

Cristina, even before she was released, could not let go of her father's execution and when faced with the judge she knew to be responsible, she confronted him directly. Afterward, she still expected her release on December 6, 1982. Cristina's mother traveled from Córdoba to Buenos Aires to reunite with her daughter. But December 7 arrived and Cristina was still in prison. Two days later, Cristina's mother who had already traveled to the capital by plane in eager anticipation of her daughter's release eventually turned back around, believing that she was tricked by the military. Before returning to Córdoba, Cristina's mother left money and documents for Cristina with a recently released prisoner, and passed the address along to Cristina.

Soon after her mother returned, Cristina was finally released, and she yelled her goodbyes to her fellow inmates. They were all behind the prison's walls. Nearly all of the

women I interviewed remembered shouting out to their compañeras before exiting the prison, out of solidarity and to assuage their feelings of guilt that they had been released and had left the other behind. But Cristina was not immediately let out into the street:

They took me to the front of the offices. A group of federal policemen were there to receive me. They held me there for a bit. I don't know what red tape had me there sitting, until they took me. They put me in a patrol boat, and I had...there were female police officers who came for me. In front there were two men and at the sides, they put me in the middle of the patrol boat, on one side was a police officer and the other...and they started to threaten me and laughed, and said horrible things, and I said, "So, what are the terms of my release and where are you taking me?" Then they told me, "We are going to kill you." And they put a gun to my temple, like they do in a robbery, the whole thing, a matter of terror. When we arrived at the federal police, at the headquarters of the federal police, they took me to a cell and I said to them, "What is this? Am I not being released? You're taking me here now?" "No, it's that we have to check the whole country, province by province, that there is no capture order under your name" (Interview CD, 12/4/2008).

What Cristina experienced was just one of the ways military officials reasserted their control over prisoners, even at the very last moments of their incarcerations. Before prisoners were released, the military frequently performed mock executions. Some of the former political prisoners believe the military wanted them to feel extremely threatened before being set free to keep prisoners in a state of fear. A large portion of those released was subjected to constant monitoring under a system called *libertad vigilada* (controlled release). The military continued to monitor the former political prisoners for up to a year, ordering them to live in a particular province, and insisting on regular, mandatory visits to the police. In some cases, ex presos had to take classes to learn "good conduct." During the dictatorship, in order to gain employment, citizens had to present a "certificate of good conduct" to verify their moral standing. For this reason, released prisoners obediently took these classes in order to gain employment. Many, however, did not have this option, and were forced to work without the document—and that work was often done off the books, and without any state benefits, like pensions upon retirement.

Cristina was eventually released by the federal police later that night and left the station with empty pockets. Fortunately, she remembered the address of the other former political prisoner with whom her mother had left money for Cristina to buy a bus ticket back to Córdoba. She eventually made her way home:

When I got home my mom wasn't there, she had gone out. I didn't know what she was doing, if she had gone downtown. I went to my neighbor's house; she was surprised to see me. They didn't detain me—they had detained me in my house, and all of the neighbors knew me since I was little. I had grown up in that house, so they received me with a lot of happiness. I returned home. And well, to be together again—the three of us who were left—was something very nice because even though my father wasn't there, at least there was the three of us. And well, it was a period full of visits with relatives, friends, coming and going, all of the things that were wonderful in recovering your freedom (Interview CD, 12/4/2008).

Traveling home and leaving prison felt strange for many people because they were not used to the noise in the streets, the currency literally had changed in value and appearance, and family members had grown older with time and stress. Cristina remembers going to her neighbor's home when she found her own empty. Kidnappings, particularly those conducted by large groups of men, were hardly discreet. In fact, these death squads conducted large operations in a way that also served to warn all those who witnessed the capture from associating with the target or the target's family. Yet, perhaps the most important resource for released prisoners were those very same people, who were not taken, who found ways to support those who did and survived. Although bystanders are criticized for their inaction, in many stories told by the former political prisoners, neighbors or other close acquaintances showed their solidarity by welcoming former detainees into their homes and offering them jobs, albeit under the table. These small acts of kindness were significant because former political prisoners were heavily stigmatized in society. Some feared being associated with them; others genuinely believed that they were indeed terrorists. Cristina's response to her newfound freedom was common: released

prisoners worked to rebuild social relationships. While Cristina spoke of her success in reconnecting with her relatives and family, for many ex presos one of the most devastating consequences of having been tortured and imprisoned for years was the strain it put on families, particularly for those whose children were babies at the time of their kidnapping, who had since grown up and no longer recognized them when their parents when they returned from prison. Cristina's story—this particular part of her life, at least—is representative of what was commonly experienced by her fellow compañeros. This experience, along with others' experiences, would later lead to social marginalization, trauma, and, years later, a struggle to win reparations and control over how the past is told in Argentina.

### **Madres Become Politicized**

The Madres' origin story is generally that of a housewife who went out to search for a missing child, and in the process of that search, became politicized. Andrea Malin, one of several scholars who have written about gender and activism amongst the Madres, describes this transformation from mother to activist:

Boldly, mothers brought their private suffering into the open to confront the military dictatorships when no one else dared. Their families ravaged by repression, they could no longer carry on their culturally prescribed roles; they had to create new roles. Based on a culturally ingrained conception of motherhood and family, and mobilized by a distinctive kind of state-sanctioned repression that cast young adults into oblivion, these mothers have transformed themselves. Using traditional notions of motherhood, they created a new collective motherhood devoted to human rights (1993:188).

Malin further argues that this movement of Madres is beyond anything political or ideological and quotes one of the members to underscore this point:

As Renee Epelbaum said, 'Too much has been said about the politicization of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo...I repeat that we began and continue as a movement because we are mothers...because our children disappeared (1993:188).

Basing their activism on motherhood was effective because symbolically it was more difficult to confront (or ignore) a group of bereaving, devoted mothers than it was to do the same to activists, who could be more easily demonized. Although Malin characterizes the disappeared children as being more idealistic than militant in her article, she does recognize that the Madres movement, which has spread internationally, is “based on the bond between mother and child and on a cultural notion of motherhood” (1993:211).

The Madres split into two groups in 1986. While the Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Asociación Madres) has adopted a radical political stance in order to carry on the social justice struggle initiated by the disappeared, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo - Línea Fundadora (Madres LF) has taken a less overtly political role. The two groups have also developed distinct relationships to the disappeared. Members of the Asociación Madres have distanced themselves from the physical bodies of their disappeared children by eschewing efforts to find bones and rejecting financial reparations from the government. For the Asociación Madres, which is more concerned with poverty and anti-globalization, the disappeared constitute a symbolic figure whose motivating presence is both everywhere and nowhere. In contrast, Madres LF works with the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team to find missing bodies, searches for missing grandchildren, and fights to bring perpetrators to justice. Madres LF turns the disappeared monolith into a group of identified and named individuals while the Asociación Madres maintains a nameless but omnipresent image of the disappeared as the symbol behind their cause.

In both cases, the disappeared children have become a silent and malleable figure. The Madres position the disappeared figure in multiple ways and in different contexts. In marches, madres hold up headshots of their disappeared children, who are further identified by the dates of

their disappearances and their professions (e.g. doctor, student, etc.). The Asociación Madres do not divide themselves by the specific parties and guerrilla organizations that their children were once part of, but rather the disappeared figure becomes representative of all of the leftist parties. The desaparecido is a militant of every stripe. For the Madres LF, all desaparecidos are tragic figures who are equally deserving of a proper burial, of having their child reunited with their biological families. The desaparecido is the child of every grieving parent.

### **The Changing Narrative**

Three decades after the dictatorship began, the ex presos have become increasingly more public figures as the survivors of the concentration camps, and they are presenting a narrative that stands in direct opposition to that of the Madres. They are claiming agency where it has been lost with the disappeared figure. The parents of the ex presos willingly adopted their own politics that in turn shaped their children's worldview, and these children grew up to carry on their families' tradition. Even when they fell prisoner, these individuals who would one day be known as ex desaparecidos held onto their beliefs and politics in the camps and prison—just as many of their parents had during previous dictatorships.

Yet this narrative of family genealogies has been absent with the figure of the disappeared. By becoming agents, the ex presos are also changing the family-based activists. The ex presos are reclaiming their identity as militants and entering the public sphere by asserting themselves as rightful members of the broader human rights community in Argentina. By speaking about their parents' influence upon them and remembering their parents as militants, the ex presos are reminding the public of the country's longer history of state terrorism. Their parents experienced state terrorism under previous dictatorships. While the



Madres have rightfully been admired for their protest movement, their activism is not the first of their generation. Ex presos continued their family genealogies of resistance in prison, and in their continued activism after their release from prison.

If the ex presos are changing the narrative about their parents' generation, then the general narrative about desaparecidos and apolitical madres changes as well. The military stole newborn children from female prisoners because they wanted to prevent the passing on of subversive genes. According to the military, the children of disappeared women would be better off with military families and their sympathizers and not with biological families who would raise them to become subversive. Thus, while the military accused families of desaparecidos of passing on their political and ideological "genes," the madres were pointing toward the biological tie and denying any form of subversion on their part. Later, the madres would use DNA testing to search and confirm missing grandchildren. The search for missing grandchildren continues and the reunions between aging Madres—who are grandmothers—and grown children is predicated on biological kinship. The Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo argue that their missing grandchildren have a right to know their identities. But, recently, in recent cases when some of these missing grandchildren are located, the discovered ones do not uniformly want to claim their "real" biological identities or be reunited with their biological families. Ari Gandsman argues that this rejection on the part of one missing grandchild, Evelyn, goes beyond that of blood ties:

The genetic identification of the children of the disappeared serves a similar function as the *Mothers'* protests of making the dictatorship's actions visible by forcing public recognition of a broken kin tie. Evelyn's denial of her biological identity is more than a rejection of a kin tie. It is simultaneously a rejection of the history that accompanies it, a refusal to recognize the events that led to her being raised by the Vázquez family [a military family] (2009: 180).

Gandsman points out that without this recognition of kinship, the state only perpetuates the disappearance of Evelyn's parents.

If the Madres insist on the biological tie to make their claims and force DNA tests to identify their missing grandchildren and rely upon their identities as mothers rather than political activists, then there is little room to recognize the lost potential in raising a generation of leftists—assuming that parents could influence their children's political worldviews. The Madres' narrative of becoming activists in the absence of their children means that no genealogy of resistance existed—they learned from their children. And the genealogy will end because the children are gone.

Conversely, the ex presos are continuing family genealogies of resistance both by their present-day actions and by recognizing that their heritage helped to make them into the militants they are. The missing grandchildren could have been shaped differently had their biological parents raised them. In a recent case of reclaimed identity, Victoria Montenegro admitted to the difficulty in coming to terms with the fact that she was a missing grandchild and after learning that the man she believed to be her father had actually killed her real parents. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Montenegro said, "I grew up thinking that in Argentina there had been a war, and that our soldiers had gone to war to guarantee the democracy. And that there were no disappeared people, that it was all a lie" (Barrionuevo, 10/8/2011). Obviously, not all children turn out like their parents, but family can be powerful in shaping how children see the world. Acknowledging the tremendous influence the disappeared could have had on their own children, however, would also validate the military's justification for their kidnappings, that they needed to prevent the raising of more "subversives." Furthermore, the recognition of genealogies of

resistance contradicts the image of the apolitical mother that the Madres have used to build their unique social movement.

Ex presos lament the loss of their *compañeros* because they believe that had they not been killed by the dictatorship, they could have influenced the future outcome for their country. They believe that had the social movements of which they and their *compañeros* were a part been successful in assuming political power, Argentina would not be as entrenched in capitalism, privatization, and in a culture of individualism. There is no way to prove this counterfactual belief, that leftist guerrillas would have brought their country to a different economic future. The importance here is that ex presos lament the end of genealogies of resistance. Disappearances cut off whole branches of a family tree. Missing grandchildren are the epitome of this absence.

However, there is also an alternative reading of the biological ties. Rather than perpetuating kinship ties as the most powerful influences in becoming an activist, the human rights community may be better served with a queer reading of the biological normativity. In fact, it is the military that used the familial model as justification for their repression: “The father-state had inalienable rights over the moral and physical fate of its children-citizens” (Jelin 2009:180). Thus, “the force of the familial language within the human rights movement can be perceived in continuation with the military’s narrative” (Sosa 2011:66). Cecilia Sosa argues that the Madres created a queer sensibility through their temporality. The Madres say that their children gave birth to them, thereby subverting traditional ideas of kinship order: “The inversion of biological sequences also opened the space for an expanded conception of kinship ties...By staging their children as giving birth to them, the Mothers showed how time as the medium of advent can be deferred, refused, and contested from a nonbiological perspective” (2011:71).

A queer reading of the Madres and other kin-based human rights groups questions the supposition in Argentina that political activation depends on familial ties and thereby opens up more possibilities for fellow citizens to engage with the history on equal terms—without having to have a blood relation to feel affected or legitimate in their suffering and desires for change. In fact, Sosa argues that Argentine human rights groups have been incorporating non-kin into their political spheres:

Although they have evoked familial titles, they do not seem to conform to any of them. They have addressed forms of support, interdependency, and care through horizontal organizations that reunite people of similar generations who have gathered together owing to their common condition of having suffered. They have evoked traditional kinship forms, but they have managed to build social arrangements that exceed the borders of the blood. They have built nonmarital and nonreproductive ties that emerge outside the heteronormative ties, but that still rely on traditional kinship titles” (Sosa 2011:76).

By expanding the human rights movement beyond kin would also address concerns over limited participation in memorialized spaces, as expressed by Elizabeth Jelin:

Paradoxically, if legitimacy for expressing memory of a painful past is socially assigned to those who suffered repression on their own bodies or those of their kin, this symbolic authority can easily (consciously or unconsciously) slip into a monopolistic claim on the meaning and content of memory and truth...Hence, the historical challenge lies in the process of construction of a more democratic, inclusive, and civic engagement with the past” (Jelin 2009:200).

A break from the kin-based activism that has long characterized the Argentine human rights movement could potentially democratize claims over collective memories of the recent past.

This new model, however, may not open the doors to the *ex presos*, who have been excluded not simply because their ties to the disappeared are based on solidarity rather than blood, but also because they are blamed for the deaths of their disappeared *compañeros*.

However, if the human rights community is built around solidarity or shared political interests instead of kin, then the mourned loss of *compañeros* from shared social and political movements

would carry more significance. Ex presos' suffering over killed compañeros would be considered no less tragic than a mother's loss of her child.

For both the ex presos and the families of the disappeared, themes of invisibility and revelation continue to remain powerful. The concrete disappearances moved the mothers and other kin into the public sphere, and the continued absence of their loved ones provided a strong emotional justification for their struggle. The silencing of, or attempts at silencing, political movements and political voices was met with active resistance in prison—actions that were not visible to the outside but remain meaningful for the ex presos. And now decades later, the ex presos are publicly identifying themselves as activists and as being part of longer histories of political resistance; they are revealing themselves after having been silenced again in their post-release from prison.

## Chapter 5

### Moral Witnesses

In Argentina, where memorialized spaces only started opening in the mid-2000s, the mandate of *Nunca Más* or “Never Again” serves as the *raison d’être* of memorialized spaces. By teaching youth about disappearances, organizers hope that visitors will seek to support democratic ways of resolving conflict and prevent similar widespread abuses of human rights from happening again. By learning about what happened at these CCDs, human rights activists hope that visitors will reflect upon the country’s past and the present political situation, and they hope to instill in them the desire to promote human rights. While the main objective is clear, the question of how to convey the message is less so. One of the challenges that the organizers of the newly memorialized former CCDs face is deciding whether or not to present these reclaimed spaces as they were found—empty and barren—or to transform them into new, dynamic places for the community and youth to gather. Should they leave them as Auschwitz was originally presented—minimal and bare—or as it may soon be presented, with new explanatory exhibitions? In addition, and more controversially, organizers of the spaces of memory at former CCDs debate over whose voice should narrate the spaces. In this chapter, I discuss the *ex presos*’ struggle to become prominent voices at CCDs as tour guides, and to do so without being associated with collaborators who also carry a lot of knowledge about how the military operated. To illustrate why it matters who directs the narratives at memorialized spaces, I examine two different CCDs: one where the guides are students of human rights and the other where *ex presos* guide visitors around the space. I argue that *ex presos* should have a role in telling the stories at CCDs because they directly experienced state terrorism in these spaces, and that their approach in speaking about their militant pasts better advances the overall goal of CCDs—to encourage

youth to become more socially conscious and to critically reflect upon dictatorships and democracy in Argentina.

The explosion of academic studies on memory, the proliferation of memorials in various cities around Argentina, and efforts by human rights groups to instigate dialogues on the past at designated *Espacios para la memoria* (“Spaces for Memory”) have all widened the discussion about the various actors and political factors behind the conflict that led to the dictatorial violence. Spaces of Memory are the new names given to select former CCDs that are being rededicated as spaces to invite the public and youth to help construct collective memories of the past together and to discuss the meaning and maintenance of democracy in Argentina today. The two most prominent Spaces for Memory are also the two major CCDs that operated during the dictatorship. In Buenos Aires, ESMA—the former Naval Mechanics School and best-known former concentration camp that was turned into a museum in Buenos Aires in 2004—held the highest number of prisoners (approximately 5,000) and had the lowest survival rate with about 200 survivors (Instituto Espacio Para la Memoria 2007:26; Jelin 2009:192). On the outskirts of Córdoba city, La Perla was the largest CCD that operated in Córdoba Province; approximately 2,000 prisoners passed through the camp, and it is not known how many survived and how many were transferred (Comisión y Archivo Provincial de la Memoria 2008:8). However, people living near the military compound witnessed bodies being dropped from airplanes onto the fields surrounding La Perla, as well as mass executions and graves. These Spaces for Memory have relied upon survivors’ testimonies to help construct narratives of how the CCD operated and to explain what happened to the prisoners. For the ex presos, the establishment of Spaces for Memory has offered an opportunity for them to shape the stories that are told about these places and the ways they describe their own disappearances. Most importantly, the ex presos

incorporate into the narrative presented at memorialized CCDs the reasons behind their abductions, and discuss the broader political motivations behind the dictatorship's decision to use disappearances against those who opposed them. This represents a departure from the way other Argentine human rights groups focus largely on the mechanics of the disappearances and on various torture practices. The ex presos emphasize that it was their political commitments that were threatening to the military and their activism that led to the repressive tactics used to silence them.

In Córdoba, the ex presos have incorporated themselves into the local human rights community—unlike in Buenos Aires—and have been able to successfully place a few *compañeros* as tour guides at “D2”—the former center of police intelligence in Córdoba that was turned into Provincial Commission and Archive for Memory in 2006. However, the ex presos still feel relatively invisible compared to other human rights groups and want a more prominent place in the collective memory projects that Argentina is undertaking in several cities (personal communication SW, 5/13/2011). The low visibility of ex presos—particularly at the sites of reclaimed former CCDs—runs counter to the way survivors in other countries have been treated in other post-war and post-violence areas.

In Argentina and elsewhere, survivors are the eyewitnesses who can attest to the events that happened in the past and in particular places. But in contrast to places like the survivor-led Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum the ex presos in Córdoba have had to lobby for their right to speak at former CCDs. They formed their organization partly hoping to have a more prominent voice in these spaces, even though all memorialized CCDs rely upon the survivors' testimonies. In order to know how to present the spaces to the public, the groups that are heading the reclamation projects need survivors—at the very least, to tell them whether or not the space has



been changed since the dictatorship, since the military often modified (or attempted to modify) certain structures in an effort to contradict testimonies. Those official bodies, jointly appointed by human rights groups and governmental organizations, need survivors to explain how the space was used. What happened? To whom? Where exactly did it take place? These simple questions and others cannot be answered without survivor assistance.

In Buenos Aires, the Asociación de Ex Desaparecidos-Detenidos (AEDD) refused to be involved with the creation of memorialized spaces, believing that it was a departure from their overall mission of political activism (Van Drunen 2010). But in Córdoba, ex presos want a prominent and leading role. There are multiple reasons why ex presos are not automatically considered to be the moral authorities in these spaces—some of which are simply bureaucratic (the AEPPC initially lacked *personería jurídica*), others relate more to political matters (some human rights activists regard survivors as being too biased to direct the memorialized spaces). Still, while survivors are uniformly consulted in the construction of memorialized spaces, they are not in charge of directing the spaces.

### **Ex Presos vs. Collaborators**

The AEPPC's struggle to take control of Córdoba's memorialized spaces is further complicated by the fact that they are often associated with collaborators. Even with the acceptance of collaborators by some of the human rights groups or activists, ex presos want to maintain the separation between themselves and those who cooperated with the military.

During the trial against former Third Army General Menéndez and seven of his sub-officials in Córdoba in May 2008, once the tribunal called each day's proceeding to a close, I regularly listened to ex presos reflect upon the trial proceedings. On one occasion, while

walking home from the Federal Tribunal building to the city center, I spoke with one political prisoner who said that we—the audience—were not hearing the complete story with the types of witnesses that testified. She told me that those who testified were collaborators. None of the ex presos in the AEPPC served as witnesses in this trial because—according to several ex presos I asked—none of them collaborated. The ex presos in the AEPPC who were detained at La Perla were blindfolded throughout their entire time there and could therefore not visually identify the eight men on trial. This distinction was important to this particular ex presa, because she was concerned that academics often neglected this difference. The distinction was not only important because it would elevate ex presos to a higher moral status than to their counterparts who collaborated, but also because it recognized that ex presos had a choice. Recalling an argument that she had with her fellow academic colleagues on the topic of collaborators, she remembered one particular academic arguing that in such circumstances as concentration camps, one must withhold one's judgment of collaborators. In the concentration camps, collaborators had a range of responsibilities, from helping with daily activities, such as taking their fellow prisoners to the shower and cleaning up blood and other bodily fluids after interrogation sessions, to identifying other potential victims by riding in cars with military officers or revealing the names of those in their organizations. Her colleague explained that because she does not know what she would do if in the same position, she suspended judgment.

Ex presos frequently find themselves trying to walk a fine line: Most ex presos argue vehemently against judging all survivors—they know only too well the kinds of judgments that have been made against them already. But the political prisoner above was not interested in suspending *all* judgment; she wanted others to recognize that certain individuals made ethical decisions. Some were never asked to collaborate, but those who were asked faced an ethical

dilemma that was in many cases literally a matter of life and death. She wasn't saying that she and others like her deserved to be placed on a higher moral plane than those who collaborated—she was disappeared when she was 19 years old, and thought it may have been easier for her to defy her captors than it would have been for someone who was, say, married and had children. (The torture of the partners and children of prisoners was a widely employed tactic.) Nevertheless, she insisted that moral recognition of people like herself, who put themselves at risk of death by not cooperating, was in order.

According to the ex presos, they did not betray others by remaining silent during torture sessions, and they maintained their militancy by showing solidarity and finding ways to resist what was put on them in prison. Yet, these acts—which they proudly remember and recount to others—are largely unacknowledged. No one is holding the ex presos accountable, and if there was an examination of each individual and what he or she said or did not say under torture or while in prison, these acts may be judged negatively. The families are suspicious of what the ex presos do not say—assuming that they are not revealing the whole story about their time in CCDs and prisons. Perhaps what they did—while surviving and in limited circumstances—put other lives at risk, and for that reason, they never reappeared.

The collaborator question makes clear that deciding whether survivors should play a role in memorialized spaces is not simply a matter of agreeing to have survivors work; it also means deciding *which* survivors are deserving of such a role. As argued previously, the marginalization of ex presos for having survived is precisely due to the suspicion that all who survived collaborated. While one solution in overcoming this marginalization is to accept all survivors—to emphasize the fact that one cannot judge another for trying to survive in the most extreme and inhuman conditions. A distinction must be made, they say, and that distinction becomes

particularly important when deciding who will be given the jobs guiding tours at memorialized CCDs. In the cases of D2 and La Perla, where positions have been allotted to survivors, the AEPPC designates the person who will work there. This decision-making process is extremely sensitive and challenging, in part because all of the AEPPC's decisions are made based on consensus. Moreover, these jobs are highly coveted because they enable aging activists to continue constructing recent Argentine history, and they also provide a small, but steady, income.

For the AEPPC, choosing the right person to serve as a tour guide at a former CCD involves several heated discussions and consensus. With few exceptions, every member of the AEPPC needs a job; every one of them could use the extra money. And they all want this job—if they weren't interested in this kind of activist work, they likely wouldn't have joined the AEPPC in the first place. So, the candidate must possess at least these two qualifications: *pólitica* and financial need. *Pólitica* roughly translates to “politics” and means having political consciousness, knowledge of social movements, and first-hand experience as an active participant in a social movement, as well as supporting commonly held political goals of the group. The *pólitica* requirement ensures that the tour guide's disposition will fall in line with the rest of the *ex preso* community. As for the latter qualification, based on the conversations that took place at meetings, financial need is determined by looking at a variety of markers, including: income, home ownership, number of (dependent or supportive) children, general health, past history of unemployment, and economic status in comparison to the rest of the *ex presos*.

When one of the witnesses who testified against former General Menéndez expressed interest in working as a guide at La Perla, a heated debate ensued. The other human rights groups in Córdoba ultimately supported her nomination—after all, she had played a key role in

successfully sentencing the military officers to spend the remainder of their lives in a common prison. The members of the AEPPC, however, felt differently about her working at La Perla.

During the AEPPC meeting when this debate took place, several members said that while they appreciated the significance of the collaborator's role in the trial, her having a job as a tour guide at the most notorious former CCD in the Córdoba Province violated the memory of those who died there, and was an insult to those who survived but did not collaborate. The military committed such terrible crimes, some AEPPC members felt, that to have a collaborator work as a human rights representative would minimize the actions of those who had chosen *not* to save their own lives through collaboration. As one AEPPC member present at the meeting said of the witness, "I welcome her into the trial and recognize her efforts, but I will not share a *maté* with her." In Argentine culture, particularly that of the working class, sipping the herbal tea, *maté*, is a sign of friendship because a group of friends will drink out of the same gourd. This *ex presa* recognized the utility of collaborators in trials but did not see them as *compañeros*, or even as worthy of inclusion in a basic social ritual. She drew a political and moral distinction between herself and someone who collaborated. Though some *compañeros* at the meeting were willing to consider the witness as a fellow worker because she too was a survivor, the final vote went against her appointment.

This desire to be distinguished from collaborators, however, is even more complicated by the fact that it is not a topic that is spoken about in public. Speaking about collaborators causes a lot of pain, anger, and fierce (internal) debates, and has the potential to undermine the overall human rights movement, which has up to now sought to present itself as a united front. Furthermore, most of my information on this topic is based on gossip, speculation, and the conversations of *ex presos* and my conversations with them. The question of who is a

collaborator is one that I cannot weigh in on. Only those who were in the camps—the disappeared, the military and the survivors—can ever truly know who did what to whom and often not even them.

Still, in spite of the complications presented by the question of collaboration, I contend that ex presos have a right to narrate, or at least contribute to, the stories told at memorialized centers because the ex presos is what Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit calls a “moral witness.” According to Margalit, a moral witness is someone who has both witnessed and experienced suffering in the face of radical evil: “He or she should witness—indeed, they should experience—suffering inflicted by an unmitigated evil regime” (2002:148). The ex presos are clear candidates for moral witnesses: they were subjected to the dictatorship’s clandestine chain of camps, torture, and absolute lack of legal rights. Obviously a torturer cannot be a moral witness despite his having witnessed evil; he is the one doing the evil act, and he is not suffering. A person who witnesses must have a moral purpose or have morality, which is why, for Margalit, a journalist who writes about suffering without acting is amoral (2002:151). This definition somewhat excludes the members of family-based human rights groups in Argentina from the category of moral witness, because while they suffered the losses of their disappeared family members, they were not in the camp themselves to witness directly what happened.

I diverge, however, from Margalit’s distinction between who is and who is not a moral witness when it comes to political prisoners. Margalit distinguishes moral witnesses from political prisoners by stating that the latter carry a different purpose: “They are not just hoping that somewhere sometime there will be a moral community that will heed their story, but they hope that they are playing an active part in the very unfolding of the story” (2002:167). In other words, the political prisoners see their role in concentration camps as instrumental because they

will tell others what they witnessed for a political goal. Moral witnesses, for Margalit, are those who—regardless of the consequences—simply give their testimonies, and speak more about how the experience felt than about the evil mechanisms that were at work.

The distinction that Margalit relies upon, however, derives from the actual difference in statuses between political prisoners and regular prisoners held in Nazi concentration camps. In those camps, the former had a more privileged position. In Argentina, all of the people the military detained for political reasons were all subjected to torture and degrading prison conditions. Political prisoners who were held in common prisons were treated worse than the common prisoners, and those political prisoners who were sent to CCDs endured abuse that common prisoners never would, as they were never sent to the concentration camps. Within the camps, the ones who received additional privileges in the secret detention camps in Argentina were those who collaborated with the military. Margalit would consider the collaborators or “traitors” to be moral witnesses because of the extreme circumstances: “But a moral witness may still be one who compromises his morality for the sake of surviving, especially if the aim is to survive as a witness” (2002:162). According to Margalit’s definition, collaborators fit the description of a moral witness better than political prisoners do because the collaborator does not consider the instrumental political consequence of giving testimony. But the *ex presos* would argue that they are more moral for their refusal to collaborate inside the camps. (Whether or not they had a choice—political prisoners may not have been offered a chance to collaborate—remains an ongoing, contentious, and internal debate within various groups.) Precisely because *ex presos* were political actors, part of their commitment included not confessing or giving up information under torture. The *ex presos* did not *cantar*—“sing,” as in “like a canary”—and they

risked their own lives by refusing to collaborate with the military. For this reason, I consider ex presos as moral witnesses.

### **Narrating Memorialized Spaces**

Establishing that ex presos are moral witnesses, however, is not enough. It is also important to argue that moral witnesses are the ones we should hear from in memorialized spaces. What led me to consider why it was significant that ex presos serve as the tour guides as CCDs were the differences I noted between the Naval Mechanics Academy (ESMA) and the former police intelligence center that operated as a CCD (D2). I argue that a primary distinction between these two sites is rooted in who gives the tours. Comparing these two sites reveals what roles ex presos can play in contributing their own knowledge of the past to these spaces and to the broader collective memories of the dictatorship. What is crucial to bear in mind, however, is that the creation of any type of memorialization is extremely politicized: “their installation is always the result of political struggles and conflicts, and their existence is a physical reminder of a conflictive political past, which may spark new rounds of conflict over meaning in each new historical period or generation” (Jelin 2007:147). Much has already been written about the tumultuous process surrounding the transformation of ESMA to a memorialized space by other scholars (Van Drunen 2010; Brodsky 2005), thus my focus is not to analyze the debates about what to do with ESMA but rather focusing on who should serve as the tour guides at memorialized sites. In other words, who are the “owners” of these spaces of memory? Jelin views the human rights groups’ claim on these spaces because of their blood relationship to the disappeared and the survivors’ direct experiences as limiting wider civic participation (2009:200). Though I agree with Jelin’s critique generally, I would also point out that survivors



have not been included. The use of survivors' testimonies does not actually give survivors a direct role over the space; their words are used without their control. At ESMA, for instance, the quotes are about torture, and not about the political activities that landed them in the CCD. AEPPC members stated that one of the arguments used against their presence is that they are too biased to give accounts. The ex presos, however, view themselves as having ownership because they directly experienced state terrorism. I do not suggest that ex presos should be the only owners of memory, only that their identities and direct experiences provide a different approach to teaching visitors about the past in former CCD sites.

## **ESMA**

ESMA, which stands for the *Escuela de Sub-Oficiales de Mecanica Armada*, or the Navy Petty Officers School of Mechanics, was the site of the first major effort by the Argentine government to officially reclaim a site of a former CCD and establish it as a museum in 2004. ESMA was the only CCD to operate throughout the entire dictatorship era and has come to symbolize the horror of disappearances. Many of the most horrific stories from this period are connected to how the Navy and its collaborators killed their victims in “death flights.” The torturers injected the disappeared victims with a chemical that made them immobile but still left them unconscious. In this paralyzed state, but completely aware, the naval officers threw the victims out of airplanes into the Atlantic Ocean.

The site was renamed the *Espacio para la Memoria y Para la Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos* (Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights), but is still referred to as ESMA by activists and scholars. ESMA is one example of what Paul Williams (2007) has termed “memorial museums”—institutions that commemorate

historical incidents of mass violence and have an “uneasy conceptual coexistence of reverent remembrance and critical interpretation” (8). Memorial museums depart from conventional norms that museums usually embody; they pay respect to the dead, contradict narratives of the previous regime, seek to make sense of the violence, and provide an experience for visitors to feel something about the events that took place (Williams 2007). Memorial museums often rely upon survivors’ or family members’ testimonies because tangible pieces of evidence are destroyed. This is certainly the case for ESMA, where the buildings stand largely empty and are presented with the help of survivor testimonials.

ESMA covers seventeen hectares, approximately 42 acres, and is composed of 34 buildings, and is located in a wealthy, residential part of city. Though it is not in the city center, it sits on one of the major thoroughfares, *Avenida del Libertador*. The compound is beautiful—uncomfortably so, considering the events that took place there. A relatively short fence of wrought metal surrounds the compound, but does not obscure the buildings, which are still clearly visible from the street. The grounds are very green and peppered with trees. Cars are able to drive through the space on a narrow road that winds around the various buildings. Visitors may not enter all of the buildings; instead they pass the largest buildings located in the center and spend most of their time in the *Casino del Oficiales*, the place where naval officers tortured victims and slept.

At the time of Williams’s study of ESMA, it was unclear how the space was going to be presented: “[S]ome want a small and simple memorial; others a larger complex that would include a documentation center and human rights academy; others still wish to see the compound razed and replaced with a park” (2007:17). The proposal to experience the site as it was left won

in the end. Aside from signs and maps containing survivors' quotes and explanations about how the spaces were used at various stages during and after the dictatorship, the rooms stand empty. ESMA is run collectively by the national government, the city government of Buenos Aires, and human rights groups—namely the Madres, Abuelas, and survivors. Because of the historic and symbolic importance of ESMA, and due to its being the first major memorialization project in Argentina, I proposed in 2008 a brief study of the visitors. The human rights groups involved in the project approved of my study. Although I knew that spending time at ESMA interviewing visitors was not going to produce a large data set, I took the opportunity to gain a better understanding of who was visiting ESMA and to find out what they learned from this Space for Memory. Most of the visitors were foreigners and students, though sometimes I encountered curious Argentines who knew of someone affected in their neighborhood. They learned about how the military operated their kidnappings, torture sessions, and executions, and how the victims suffered during their time in ESMA.

When I visited ESMA in 2008, the guided tours were still in the beginning stages of development and the site was not yet officially open to the public. The memorialized space now also hosts the National Archive of Memory, though at the time I was in Argentina, it was still under construction. However, they began giving tours of the space in January 2008; my first visit was only the third time a tour had been given at ESMA. All visitors must follow a guided tour which lasts about two hours. To arrange a visit, potential visitors must send an email to the organizers and provide personal identification information, state how many people are interested in visiting, list any organizational affiliations, and explain their reasons for wanting to visit. The organizers reply with a specific time and date. The guides are neither direct relatives of the disappeared nor survivors. When I asked about how often tours were offered, the students who

serve as the guides explained the relative infrequency, saying, “Hacemos visitas espaciadas para no saturarnos.” (We space out the visits to not overwhelm ourselves.)

Here I would like to speak more in-depth about the actual tour narrative, as the ESMA tour will offer a point of comparison to how tours were given at D2. In total, I went on four tours and although the guides changed, they all followed the same narrative. In general, there were no specific details or elaborate stories about individuals, but rather an explanation of what happened in each space in the main building where victims were held. The emphasis was on the disappearance process, starting with the Naval officers’ use of numbers to replace prisoners’ names (contributing to their dehumanization) and continuing through the process of hooding, torture—particular note was made of the torturers living side-by-side with their victims—and the elaborate system involved in conducting disappearances and disposing of bodies. The tours begin in front of a general map of the naval compound, where the guides provide a general overview of the dates and events of the last military dictatorship. The map stands near one of the two gated entrances into the military compound; there visitors learn why ESMA gained its infamous reputation: the death flights, the torture methods, and the highly systematic operation of disappearances at ESMA that lasted throughout the entire dictatorship.



Figure 1: Facing Avenida del Libertador from inside ESMA's front gate. Photo taken by author 2/8/2008.



Figure 2. The new National Archive for Memory at ESMA. Photo taken by author 2/8/2008.



Figure 3. The Central Office known as the “Four Columns.” Photo taken by author on 2/8/2008.

Any differences between the four tours I witnessed had more to do with the types of questions from and conversations between visitors and the guides. For instance, during the tour on February 18, 2008—I was carrying an audio recorder—one of the eight visitors<sup>27</sup> opened with a question about whether or not the Navy had abused other political prisoners prior to 1976. In response, the guide said:

Since March 24, 1976, forced disappearances started to become a state policy, let’s say, official and institutionalized, I mean. This before had been the actions of paramilitary groups, paramilitary groups led by Lopez Rega and the Triple A, the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance.

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<sup>27</sup> The visitors included: an older Argentine woman, her friend, and her daughter who was a university student; a journalist and her sister; the German ambassador to Argentina; and an Italian law student studying human rights and her boyfriend.

The guide was referencing the fact that the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance, or Triple A, piloted the use of concentration camps, and that when the dictatorship took power in 1976, the military appropriated the model and expanded it in order to disappear thousands. The visitor's question, however, prompted others to think about the context that made it possible to disappear people. Generally the guides only discussed the dictatorship era rather than previous dictatorial periods in Argentina.

We continued by following the path that traced the way victims entered the compound. As we walked along the road that was once gated off toward the main building—the “Casino” where the victims and the naval officers lived—the guide informed us that the building remained empty and that this was part of a larger debate:

It's a space that is completely empty, just like how the military left it when they entered the building. This is a result of a larger debate that took place between the human rights organizations—to leave the space empty and to be able to impress through the emptiness what had happened inside without the necessity of stooping to a low level, without a reproduction of the kinds of tortures that happened.

This question, like the discussion about how to update Auschwitz, is part of the challenge of representing violence. On the one hand, many fear that exhibits may cheapen or sensationalize the historical events, and create voyeuristic tours of terror. One of the groups that opposed presenting an empty memorialized site is the Asociación Madres, whose president Hebe de Bonafini, was reported saying in the left-leaning newspaper *Página/12* on February 1, 2008: “Our disappeared children live, life continues, they beat death...They burned them alive and they couldn't [kill them], they threw them into the river alive, and they couldn't, they buried them under highways and they couldn't. Our children are not bones, they are life that is born as seen in every one of you!” For the Asociación Madres, ESMA should have been a place to demonstrate that the military did not defeat their children, and they felt that message would be best illustrated

by not presenting the space as a place of death, but a place where there is life, humor, happiness, and social activism. At the time, the newspaper article also announced that on April 30, 2008, part of the ESMA compound—the Naval social club area—would be transformed into a Cultural Center of Our Children and run by the Asociación Madres. Thus, a compromise had been made to incorporate various kinds of spaces in the ESMA site.

As we continued walking down the driveway where, during the dictatorship cars holding victims in their trunks would pass by a guard post, we were told that there used to be a crossbar that had to be lifted for cars to enter. The guides explain that they know this is how the victims entered because people who were inside the trunks of cars testified to feeling a speed bump. Although we did not enter the other set of buildings on our right, the tour guide acknowledged them, explaining that they included the infirmary where victims received medical care, including dental care. Keeping victims alive after torture sessions only added to the perverse treatment of victims. The guide said that several survivors recalled their torturers repeating to them that they were the “*dueños de la vida y la muerte*” (masters of life and death).





Figure 4. The health clinic. Sometimes victims were forced to receive dental work. Photo taken by author 2/8/2008.



Figure 5. The Mess Hall (*Casino de Oficiales*) where the officers lived and where the victims were held and tortured. Photo taken by author 2/8/2008.

Although there is a functional front entrance to the Casino, we were led around the back where the second entrance to ESMA is located. When the captives arrived, the guide explained,

they were bounded and hooded: “*Los secuestrados ya eran traídos con grilletes en los pies, con esposas en las manos, un tabique y una capucha, que les impedía cualquier tipo de visibilidad.*” (The kidnapped were brought here with shackles already on their feet, with their hands handcuffed, they were walled up and hooded to prevent them from having any sight.) We entered the hallway, where survivors recalled seeing high ceilings as they peeked out from behind their blindfolds. Reports of this particular high-ceilinged hallway made their way—thanks to the testimonies of political exiles—to the attention of international human rights groups and foreign governments. When these outside groups requested on-site inspections of ESMA, the military altered the physical structure of the building—including the installation of a new drop ceiling in this hallway—specifically designed to contradict those testimonies. But as the tour guide pointed out, the new drop ceiling made little architectural sense since it covered the tops of a series of arched windows. Human rights groups had hired architects to analyze the structure; this was one of the discrepancies they found.

This hallway leads to the front hall of the front entrance. Previously there was a staircase that victims descended for their initial interrogations, but the floor was filled in to hide the stairs leading to the basement, as the guide pointed out: *Una de las modificaciones que hacen es cambian todo un tramo de la escalera que va hacia el sótano. El sótano era el primer lugar donde llevaban a los secuestrados y se ingresaba directamente por acá y por adentro.* (One of the modifications that they did was change an entire flight of stairs that went to the basement. The basement was the first place that they took the captives and they were taken directly through here and inside.) The military left a banister piece where it would logically lead to a staircase pointed downstairs. The basement is where victims were given a number (or a number and a

letter) that was used by their captors in place of their names. This was the first step of the process of dehumanization that took place at ESMA.

Before heading upstairs, we were briefly directed to another large conference room off of the front room. This is where military officials and civilians held meetings to plan operations, team that were referred to as *grupos de tareas* (“task groups”). The guide explained that the military collaborated with all sectors of society to not only conduct the disappearances but to also hide their crimes from the public: “*El grupo de tareas estaba dividido en tres: estaba por una parte el Servicio de Inteligencia, por otra parte Operaciones y por otra parte Logística.*” (The task group had three divisions: there was the Intelligence Service part, another part was Operations, and another part was Logistics.) By explaining how each of the three groups worked together to track, find, and kidnap their victims, the guide sought to impress upon the visitors how massive the infrastructure was in disappearing people and to make clear that far more people were implicated in the crimes than simply uniformed military officers.

After exiting the conference room, we stepped outside to another door that leads to a short set of stairs down into the basement, an alternative way to reach the basement. This was where they gathered people who were about to board one of the *vuelos de la muerte* (“death flights”): “*Con el tema de los Vuelos de la Muerte los días miércoles alrededor de las cinco de la tarde eran llamados por un número ciertos detenidos, que ya estaban previamente arreglado a quién se iba a llamar.*” (With regard to the death flights, every Wednesday around five in the afternoon there would be calls for a certain number of detainees who had been pre-selected to be called.) In the basement, there are large maps that the human rights groups installed to show how the space was changed and transformed over the dictatorship years to create more torture rooms, slave labor areas, and numerous prison cells. At that point in the tour, the guide explained

that while he and his colleagues are the ones giving the tours, the information that they are passing on is based on survivors' knowledge: "*Guiada por los sobrevivientes, ya que aquí se pudo ingresar en el 2004, pero hasta ese momento no podían. Bueno, de hecho todos los planos que vemos a lo largo de la visita también fue realizado en conjunto con los sobrevivientes*" (The guide was developed with survivors; they could enter in 2004 but until that moment, they couldn't. Well, in fact, all of the plans we have been looking at throughout the visit were developed with the survivors.) Before leaving the basement, we were led to a smaller room that was used for interrogation sessions, and were told that this was the place where the detainees received their numbers.

We continued on, walking up the stairs to the top floor. Along the stairwell, there are scratches on the wall—one of the guides said that they were left behind by the victims who were led upstairs blindfolded. The disappeared victims slept in the attic, while their torturers slept on the two floors below the attic. While the attic had virtually no light, the naval officers enjoyed a window in each of the building's eighty rooms. At the top of the stairs, the ceilings are lower, and the air is stuffier without any ventilation. This is where the victims were kept for days, months, or years. The first two small rooms at the top of the stairs were known as the "pregnancy wing" because it was where prisoners gave birth, handcuffed to the beds. Nothing would suggest that these rooms were used for medical purposes; aside from their extremely small size, there is nothing to distinguish them from any of the other rooms. The guide spoke about the missing grandchildren that the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo are searching for—the children who were born at ESMA and other CCDs were given away to military families or their sympathizers.



Figure 6. The attic of the *Casino de Oficiales*, where the military kept prisoners blindfolded, their hand tied together. Photo taken by author on 2/8/2008.

The rest of the floor is divided into two parts. On the left is where the victims slept on the floor, packed in tightly like sardines. Thin, metal triangular bars lying on the floor marked the divisions of each cell. The attic walls are slanted, which prevented prisoners from standing up; victims were always forced to lie on their mattresses. There were two tiny windows on each side of the attic floor and it is hard to imagine what the space must have smelled like when it was crammed with the bodies of prisoners suffering from burned flesh, festering wounds, and a general lack of hygiene. Prisoners ate two sandwiches a day, and drank *mate cocido* (a bagged version of the traditional grass drink, mate, which is typically served in loose-leaf form).

As we paused in the attic, the guide spoke about one particular woman prisoner who was a founder of the group Montoneros, Norma Arrostito. During her imprisonment the Director of ESMA, Admiral Rubén Jacinta Chamorro, would apparently engage in daily conversations with

Norma about politics. This was remarkable as the military often said to their female victims that women were incapable of intelligent conversations and were better suited for staying at home. The guide, however, quickly pointed out that not all of the women were guerrillas: “In here there were women other than guerrillas: also housewives, and there were also mothers, others who worked, this one [Arrosito] was...”

At this point, another guide who had been accompanying the tour said, “There is a story, in one part that I read, that it was speculated that Chamorro was...”

“In love,” said the first guide, just before the other finished her sentence: “In love with Arrostito.” The first guide finished the story, telling us that although Arrostito was secluded from other military officers, one day she received an injection and died.

On the opposite side of the attic is where the military kept stolen goods taken from the victims’ homes. Beyond this storage space was what was once called the “fishbowl.” Surrounded by windows, victims who were writers or intellectuals were forced to write fake news reports and propaganda under the watchful eye of the military. The guide drew our attention to the use of euphemisms to describe their actions:

For example, here they didn’t kidnap people...they kidnapped bulk, packages for what they called subversives. There was a General, General Camps, who had declared that “We don’t torture human beings, we torture ‘subversives.’” Neither were there “mass killings, there were “transfers.” There was no electric shock torture, there was “the machine.” There was no asphyxiation; there was “the submarine.” As we say, they were all euphemisms to make their actions more innocent, when they were considered more painful according to society’s moral code, let’s say. I think this was pretty significant...this use of language.

Toward the end of the tour, the guides stressed that the people detained at ESMA were victims—even the ones who were considered guerrillas:

The subversive category covers wide sectors of society; it wasn’t simply guerrillas. Equally I think that by saying guerrilla I am not taking a position. I think that all of them were innocent victims...what I mean, the same word victim has the meaning of

innocence. That is what it framed, as we said before, in a repressive plan that came from the state, that is, it was a terrorist state. Therefore the people who were inside here had no legal rights, had no...let's see, they had no legal causes, they could not present legal causes, they had none of the procedural guarantees that one would have in a penal unit.

The tour ended with a commentary on the ongoing and upcoming trials against the former military officials:

Yes, it's important what we are saying that you take away that the military, from this really monstrous and inhuman place that you apply to them a category that is more human, because they really were... they were human beings and this is what makes it even worse. You can't absolve them but you can place them on a scale where you can place a value and judge. That is why they are being judged now, because they deserve to be judged, and all of the cases that have been brought up against them are not an act of...of vengeance.

Since most of the tour was focused on how the military treated their victims, it was important for the guides to argue that the torturers were neither exceptionally cruel people, nor mentally ill people, but ordinary people. For this reason, they said, the officers should stand trial.

We exited the Casino and headed toward another building across the compound to view an exhibit presented by Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Politicos. The display included photographs of known naval officers who worked at ESMA during the dictatorship (all of them men), as well as newspaper clippings strung on boards in chronological order that were published during the dictatorship.

At ESMA, the overall tour narrative was focused on explaining to the visitors how the victims experienced the concentration camp, how they were dehumanized, tortured, and how they lived before their deaths. In addition, the focus was also on how the military operated, explaining how they were able to plan the kidnappings, and cover up their crimes—even when international human rights groups announced their visits. (The military moved the prisoners to a remote location, opened up ESMA for inspection, and then waited the inspectors to leave the country before bringing the prisoners back.) The two important additional commentaries made

about the prisoners both emphasized their innocence—a quality that the guides applied even those who were guerrillas. Thus, the narrative presented at ESMA is clear: The military engaged in state terrorism. They broke the law and treated other humans in horrific, genocidal ways. The prisoners, no matter who they were, are the victims. This clear division between perpetrators and victims was also the basis for the guides’ other commentary at the end of the tour, about the military officials who were then about to stand trial for crimes against humanity. The guides state that the military officials who were responsible for the crimes that took place at CCDs like ESMA should be put on trial and judged for torturing and killing others.

## **D2 in Córdoba**

In an article about the newly memorialized D2 that appeared in the left-leaning broadsheet *Página /12* on June 1, 2008, the journalist reported that there was an “unusual intensity against forgetting” in Córdoba. The report referred to the CCD that was once Departamento de Informaciones de la Policía de la Provincia de Córdoba, or the center for police intelligence known as “D2,” which reopened as the home of the Provincial Commission and Archive for Memory in 2006. While ESMA spans an entire former military compound with buildings that once housed officers, D2 is far more modest. The structure is part of a larger historic building, the *Cabildo*, the seat of colonial government, which sits in the provincial capital’s main square. D2 is made up of several small rooms, and it appears today much as it once did—it looks like a small police department station.

Although La Perla is the largest and is considered to be the most notorious of the CCDs in Córdoba province, D2 was most frequently the place where prisoners were first taken before being transferred to other CCDs. Many AEPPC members passed through D2 before being taken



elsewhere, and they knew that they were there, despite being blindfolded—because they could hear the church bells of the city’s Cathedral nearby. Other prisoners were able to guess their location by feeling the cobblestone-paved passageway that runs between the Cabildo and the Cathedral, known as the Pasaje Santa Catalina. Until 2006, access to this passageway was restricted to police cars. Today, hundreds of pedestrians cut through this car-free alley to reach the town square. Unlike ESMA, which is located off the beaten path in the leafy Buenos Aires neighborhood of Belgrano, D2 is situated in a spot that ensures a very high volume of foot traffic, and its placement in the city center makes it far more accessible for visitors to wander in. They do not need to pre-arrange visits, and it is far easier to reach than La Perla, which is tucked away in a soybean field near the Air Force compound, about 10 kilometers to the west in the outskirts of Córdoba city.



Figure 7. Pasaje Catalina, with D2 on the left and the Cathedral on the right. Photos of disappeared victims from Córdoba are strung between the buildings every Thursday when the Madres are present to walk in the main plaza. Photo taken by author on 7/12/2008.

Visitors to D2 drop their bags at the front door and are allowed to meander through the space at their own pace.



Figure 8. Front door of D2. Photo taken by author 7/12/2008.

D2 is well-staffed with members of all of the human rights groups, students, and young professionals, as well as with academics who help conduct archival research and plan events, such as speakers, panels, readings, and art shows. D2's director is an anthropologist, Ludmila da Silva Catela, who has recognized the importance of ex presos in helping to create the memorialized space. About five or six positions are reserved for members of the AEPPC. Four ex presos who work as tour guides are frequently on hand to provide impromptu tours, provided that they are not busy either running the office, the library, or guiding groups of students from local schools around the space.

Because I spent nearly every other day hanging out at D2, I often accompanied the tours and sometimes acted as a translator for foreigners, since none of the ex presos speak English. The narrative they composed began not with the system of terror built by the dictatorship but with the historical context of the place. D2, the guides say, is housed in the province's *cabildo*, the colonial building of administration, which is now used for multiple purposes, ranging from tourist information to government offices. The *cabildo* has long been a site of oppression, argue the ex presos. The Jesuits who colonized Córdoba detained the indigenous there, and since then, various previous dictatorships have held political prisoners in the building. From there, the ex presos then speak about broad social and political movements that took place all over the world in the 1960s and 1970s—such as the student uprising in Paris in 1968—and also speaking about a unified liberation movement in Latin America that was aimed at making the region less dependent on the U.S. For the ex presos, the purpose of speaking about these massive efforts to enact large-scale changes to society is to put what happened in Argentina in the 60s and 70s into the context of a larger global phenomenon.

The guides, who represent the AEPPC and other former political prisoners, always state, in o uncertain terms, that they know why they were taken by the military. Instead of speaking about cases of innocent or non-politically involved victims, they readily admit that they were pushing for a vision of the world that reflected their values. They believed their economic model—which was unabashedly socialist—would create greater equality, and they joined political movements to effect change in Argentina. For that reason, they contend, the military came after them—to destroy them as individuals, to break down their social ties, and to eliminate their social movements altogether.

As they take visitors through the space, they describe how prisoners entered the space, where they waited, and where the interrogation rooms were located. They also point out structural changes made to the building, in the military's attempt to alter the physical space to contradict survivors' testimonies. This is also physically represented by the large holes that have been punched through the walls constructed by the departing police and military collaborators of the dictatorship, so that visitors may walk fact that the newly constructed walls have had holes punched through them, so that visitors may walk through the opening.

Unlike the tours at ESMA, visitors do not hear from the ex presos about various torture methods, nor do they recount individual experiences of torture—neither their own experiences, nor anyone else's. Most of the children on the tours, however, according to Juan Carlos, ask about torture. In response, the tour guides often suggest reading *Nunca Más* because the truth commission report contains testimonies about the various torture methods used against them. For the tour guides, they want to impress upon the visitors the importance of social movements, historical repression, and democracy. The ex presos want to avoid having students associate political activism with being vulnerable to torture or repression:

**Rebekah:** Do you like your guided tours? Do you enjoy doing it?

**Juan Carlos:** Yes, I like to do it. The issue for me is that it gets complicated when the kids—because it's another issue this one—the kids, very young, need to know how, as I am not a teacher here, so when the kids start to ask things, like how did they electrocute you, or do the “submarino,” what were you feeling? Things like that, that they have seen on television all of the time on some show--that's garbage. It's a banal question, stupid, but to answer it here from pain, where there is pain, where there is death, and to transform the place to one with life. Sometimes it's hard for me to figure out how to get out of the situation out of all of things with kids, that they ask you this type of questions (Interview JA, 2/25/2009).

The ex presos make fervent attempts to mediate discussions among visitors to D2 about the different economic models envisioned by various leftist groups on one side and those held by the

conservative elite or the military and its supporters on the other, as a way of explaining why the conflict erupted in the first place. They explain that the military kidnapped and tortured them for opposing their economic plan to liberalize and privatize Argentina, rather than adopting a more socialist model, which had a broad base of support throughout Latin America during the Cold War. Thus, the ex presos say that they were targeted for being in unions, working in poor communities, joining political organizations, or holding beliefs that departed from the dictatorship's ideology. In the months between the time the CCD opened and until after the major renovations finished on March 24, 2009, the tours ended by ushering visitors to spend time in two rooms with exhibitions. The first one, about censorship, displayed books that had been prohibited during the dictatorship because their material was deemed subversive. The ex presos also spoke about music that was banned, and the prohibition against meeting in groups of more than three people. If parents wanted to hold a birthday party, they first had to receive a permit from the local police and list all of the names of the guests who would attend. Showing the breadth and seemingly arbitrary nature of the list of subversive materials was intended to demonstrate to visitors how easy it was to be potentially labeled as subversive, since once could be disappeared for owning the wrong book or record. For the exhibition in the second room, which has since been changed, family members of some disappeared victims in Córdoba have created scrapbooks that contained photos and letters of the missing persons to show a more holistic view of the person. Also in the room are some of their belongings—a necklace, a confirmation dress, a beloved motorcycle, and a few favorite records.



Figure 9. Early exhibit of censored books during the dictatorship at D2. Photo taken by author on 8/1/2008.



Figure 10. One exhibit at D2 includes books memorializing the lives of disappeared victims from Córdoba. The parents and former prison mates of these victims browse through the books. Photo taken by author on 7/23/2008.



Figure 11. A photo of Monica Cappelli wearing a necklace (also displayed in the frame) made for her by her brother before she was disappeared. Photo taken by author on March 24, 2008.



Figure 12. Mural in the conference room on censorship at D2. Photo taken by author on March 24, 2008.

Leading tours is a form of militancy for the ex presos. Juan Carlos said that speaking to visitors helped him feel a sense of ownership of the memorialized space, and was a way for him to teach about social movements and repression. Juan Carlos described each of the roles the workers of D2 play—both former political prisoners and non-survivors—as a collective working to further the archive’s purpose despite facing constant economic challenges:

In the archive, the *compañeros* that are working here, we are in different areas. I am in the library. I do guided tours. I go to schools or libraries, and other *compañeros* also do this work. Other *compañeros* are involved in investigations. There are others that do oral archives. Each area has its own job but that is always being evaluated within a design that comes from the law passed stating what the Commission does. The Commission has to always meet, and create standards that are in line with this, that little by little we have been accomplishing at some point as I was telling you the other day. There have been crisis points when we didn’t even have toilet paper here, and the Archive kept going because there is a lot of creativity and imagination. Money is necessary for everything, but when you don’t have any money, there is some way that you find to attend to the people, like you have to...this is something that sometimes hurts, hurts because it’s your own flesh, because it is our lives and our memories. I’m telling you, I don’t have to go crazy with those quotidian problems on discussions of many things. I have to focus on this. I have to get out of this because I have to attend to the people. I have to attend to the visitors. I have to search for things from the archive. I have to go to the library—this is militancy, this we are doing with a lot of militancy (Interview JA, 2/25/2009).

Memory work becomes an activist cause. The messages being shared at D2 are those of the ex presos, and their identities becomes inseparable from the site at which they were once detained.



## DERRIBANDO OLVIDOS

Este muro fue  
construido una vez  
finalizado el  
gobierno de facto, y  
distorsionaba el  
espacio original del  
D2, dificultando el  
reconocimiento del  
recorrido habitual  
que los detenidos  
eran obligados a  
hacer durante los  
años 70 en este  
**Centro Clandestino  
de Detención.**

Abrir este muro  
permitió recuperar la  
memoria sobre el  
espacio y sacar de las  
sombras la historia.

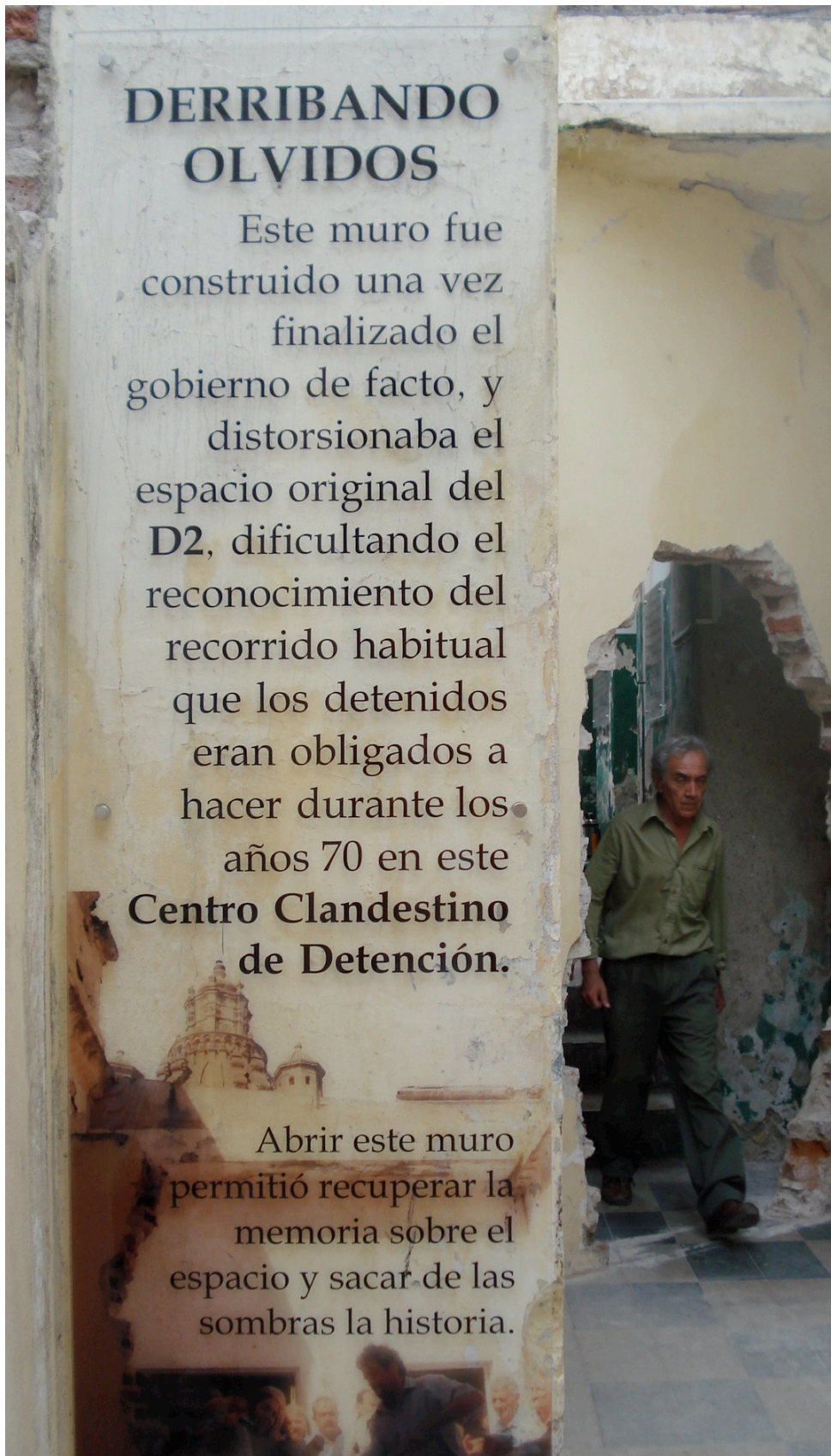


Figure 13. Juan Carlos Alvarez, a former political prisoner, walking through one of the newly constructed walls that did not exist during the dictatorship.

On the wall is written: "Erasing Oblivion. This wall was constructed at the end of the de facto government and distorted the original space of D2 in an attempt to make it difficult to recognize the daily path in which the detainees were forced to walk during the 70s in this Clandestine Center of Detention. Opening up this wall allows us to recover memories from this space and out of the shadows of history."

Photo taken by author on March 24, 2008.

## Comparing ESMA and D2

Comparing ESMA and D2 is challenging because of the differences in the location, size, and purpose of each institution. On the other hand, paying attention to memory projects outside of the capital is also useful to understanding how smaller communities create their own cultures of memory. Córdoba's smaller size and smaller human rights community has helped integrate ex presos into that community, as personal connections between the members of the various groups are more common. In Buenos Aires, the tensions among the various human rights groups makes it more challenging to collaborate across interests, which may help explain why the AEDD is not as involved at ESMA as the AEPPC members are at D2. Multiple projects take place at both of these sites, but I have chosen to focus on the tours because the narratives presented at each place reveal the central messages conveyed to visitors.

While guides at both locations described how prisoners moved through the space, where they were kept, and the various purposes of each room, the overall narratives differed significantly in terms of their central messages. While the university students in Buenos Aires focus on how the dictatorship conducted its systematic disappearances and the types of torture that were inflicted upon the victims, the ex presos provide a much larger historical trajectory when explaining the D2 space in Córdoba. They also speak about the broader social movements going on throughout the world in the 1960s and 70s, and how this historical and cultural context shaped the political motivations behind their abductions and the enduring social impacts of the dictatorship's economic policies. At ESMA, the guides share stories about specific disappeared victims<sup>28</sup>, whereas at D2, the ex presos seek to destabilize the widely circulated image of the innocent victim by explicitly stating that they know why they were detained. Students at ESMA

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<sup>28</sup> I returned to visit ESMA again in May 2008, with the ex presos políticos. By that time, quotes from survivors about their time in the attic had been mounted throughout the cells.

spoke about the torture methods and the way the military coordinated disappearances. At both sites, organizers attempt to solicit from visitors contributions to constructing multiple collective memories of the past, and invite them to reflect upon present-day issues of discrimination, human rights, and democracy. But at ESMA, the history could be summed up as one of torture and victimization, and the message for visitors is that they must work to prevent future atrocities. Meanwhile at D2, the history is one of social movements that—in the eyes of the ex presos—sought to make Argentina a more equal society, and were stifled by a brutally repressive military regime. The lesson they try to teach is that democracy must be supported in order to allow people to be as politically engaged as possible—even when that democratic freedom is threatening to those who wield power.

“Never again.” That phrase, which is the common stated goal of both Argentine sites—and most (if not all) memorials and museums to genocide around the world—leaves Williams to question what these installations teach the public. “The variety of political, social, and cultural contexts in which atrocious events have occurred might have us ask just what, as a general human populace, we should ‘never again’ do? Should we never again be victims or never again act as perpetrators?” writes Williams (2007:155). To attempt to answer to Williams’s question—which is made all the more urgent, considering that, despite the significant resources poured into countless memorials and museums around the world, genocides continue to be committed, even today—I offer the motivations of the ex presos who work at the memorialized spaces in Córdoba. Ex presos view the success of the human rights movement in Argentina not in any one memorial but rather in the new political situation that now favors human rights. In other words, Argentina has come a long way from rampant repression and killings, to the point of creating spaces through the country for the promotion of human rights and for the perpetual

memorialization of those same heinous acts. The norms have changed, and the ex presos seek to maintain this new context by teaching the importance of critical thought and political action. Other human rights activists working at D2 and La Perla seek to question what constitutes a democracy, and how the country can resolve deep political conflict in democratic ways. This is the lesson that the ex presos and their fellow human rights activists seek to instill at memorialized sites—that never again will they allow the country’s democracy to weaken, for fear that norms may again change and enable abuses to occur. Memorial museums offer visitors an opportunity to think about the past, reconsider their societal roles, and contemplate what they may do differently if another repressive regime were to arise. The AEPPC—the survivors—help convey to the people they encounter the importance of preventing future violence by asking visitors to reflect not just on some distant past, but on why they, the ex presos, were taken. They encourage visitors to reflect on the methods chosen by the military to impose their political goals, encouraging visitors to engage in critical reflection about their role as citizens in promoting democracy. Other citizens can pose these questions as well, but the complicated status of political prisoners invites critical thought and questions crucial for understanding the moral complexities that emerge in times of political violence.

### **Speaking Again After Silence**

Although Antonius Robben argues that Argentina did not experience the same kind of silence that occurred after the Holocaust (2005), the human rights activists and ex presos I met in Córdoba told me the opposite. During the 1990s, while Argentina was privatizing its national industries in an effort to modernize the economy, the amnesty and pardons granted to the military officers established a general tone of silence around the dictatorship. Speaking about the

dictatorship was taboo—as one museum worker told me at the Córdoba Museum of Anthropology. In the past decade, with a more sympathetic president and continued efforts on the part of the human rights community to keep memory in the public eye, this has changed. Public memorialization projects of all kinds kept the pressure on the national government to overturn the amnesty, and in 2005, the government did so, paving the way for a new round of trials. Today, these spaces of memory serve as vehicles to pass on the message of the human rights community, to present their view of recent history, and to reflect upon the past and future in the hopes of strengthening democracy and promoting human rights. As moral witnesses, the former political prisoners recount their own individual memories as a way to educate others: “To remember now is to know now what you knew in the past, without learning in-between what you know now. And to know is to believe something to be true. Memory, then is, knowledge from the past. It is not necessarily knowledge about the past” (Margalit 2002:14). The ex presos are not simply talking about what they know of the dictatorship but sharing their knowledge they painfully acquired by having directly witnessed what the dictatorship did to them.

Having ex presos tell the story of what happened to them as individuals allows others who visit spaces of memory to think about what they would do, were they ever put in the same situation. Walking through the sites of former sites of CCDs with a moral witness is a different experience than walking with someone else, because the former political prisoners are not imagining or speculating; they are passing on their knowledge of the past. Furthermore, to listen to a moral witness is to respond ethically. These ex presos also state that the conflict that led to the dictatorial regime was not due to random violence, but a result of serious political tensions that were not resolved democratically. Margalit suggests that moral witnesses provide hope—not necessarily hope in general for humanity, but a hope that incorporates a belief that a future

without evil will eventually exist: “The hope with which I credit moral witnesses is a rather sober hope: that in another place or another time there exists, or will exist, a moral community that will listen to their testimony” (2002:155). More than three decades after the coup d’etat that upended their lives in 1976, the ex presos are for the first time, finding that place where their testimonies are, at long last, being listened to, being heard.

## Chapter 6

### Solidarity and Resistance in Prison

The most common story told about the victims of Argentina's last military dictatorship is about torture and suffering at the hands of sadistic military officers and their collaborators—including doctors, policemen, and priests. For instance, Iain Guest's book *Behind the Disappearances: Argentina's Dirty War Against Human Rights and the United Nations* (1990), which was written based on confidential documents and memoranda, contains several descriptions of torture that are typical of how scholars of the Argentine dictatorship describe what happened to prisoners, including this one:

It was time for Ana María to meet “Caroline.” Caroline was the name given to a thick broom handle with two long wires that ran through and out at the end, like the antennae of a large insect. Caroline had been invited and christened by an electrician at the ESMA<sup>29</sup> who was known to the detainees by his nickname “the electric cat.”

Torture had been practiced in Argentina since the 1930 coup, in spite of being expressly outlawed in Argentina's constitution and penal and military justice codes. Dr. Leopoldo Lugones, police chief under the first military regime, took advantage of Argentina's predilection for beef and used the electric cattle prod or “picana” to extract information from detainees. The “picana” became the favorite instrument of torturers throughout Latin American, and Eduardo Pedace, an Argentinian pathologist, became the world authority at identifying the unseen burns it caused.

Nothing, however, remotely resembled the scale on which torture was practiced in Argentina after the 1976 coup. At the ESMA, it took place in three basement rooms next to the photo laboratory and infirmary. Sometimes there was a doctor on hand to gauge the amount of suffering the prisoners could take and revive them before they died. Nine doctors were seen in the hospital by detainees. One, who had been given the macabre name of “Mengele,” was present as Ana María Martí was stripped and tied to the steel bed frame. She watched, dazed, as Caroline was attached to a box on a table. The insect's antennae were throbbing and dancing with the current, its jaws open. They closed on the steel frame. Then came the agony, unspeakable agony, as the insect moved hungrily over her body, probing, spitting and spluttering while Antonio Pernía's grin hovered above.

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<sup>29</sup> ESMA is short for *Escuela de Suboficiales de Mecánica de la Armada* or the Navy Petty-Officers Schools of Mechanics.

It was unhurried and methodical. If the victim was a woman they went for the breasts, vagina, anus. If a man, they favored genitals, tongue, neck. The aim was to cause disorientation as much as pain. Sometime victims twitched so uncontrollably that they shattered their own arms and legs. Patrick Rice, an Irish priest who had also worked in slums and was detained for several days, recalls watching his flesh sizzle. What he most remembers is the smell. It was like bacon (41).

These descriptions, which were not written long after the fall of the dictatorship, were powerful in revealing the extent to which the military committed human rights abuses. The dramatization and attention to detail—what the burning flesh smelled like, the pace at which the torturers electrocuted victims, and the smiles that the torturers wore while witnessing pain—illuminate for readers the reality of what happened at the hundreds of secret detention camps. In order to convey the severity of the repression, human rights organizations included in their reports survivors' testimonies of their harrowing accounts and detailed descriptions of torture methods (IACHR 1980; Amnesty International 1979). Amnesty International got its start by waging international campaigns against torture and focusing on individual cases of political prisoners (Keys 2012:202). In addition, the 1984 truth commission report *Nunca Más* was based on similar testimonies from survivors describing their being kidnapped and tortured. Stories like the one above are what most people think of when speaking of the dictatorship's prisoners.

Without a doubt, there is a time and a place to document torture and prison conditions, and documentation is critical if we wish to recognize human suffering and incriminate the perpetrators. However, when we restrict the survivors' narrative to accounts of human rights abuses like these, not only do we fail to see the ways in which they were affected after their release, but we also remain blind to the ways they coped while undergoing those abuses, and how they survived in spite of them. While the women *ex presas* also told personal stories, they spoke about the inhumane prison conditions but rarely about torture. Instead they spoke about resistance and solidarity. The men also spoke about these two themes, but usually from a



broader historical perspective, positioning themselves within Argentine history, and depersonalizing their narratives. Both the women's and men's narratives, though gendered in their forms differ from dominant, official accounts in that the ex presos speak about themselves as agents rather than solely as sufferers.

The ex presos are reluctant to present narratives of torture when giving tours or speaking publicly about their detention, because they do not want to be defined by an image of a suffering, inactive, and powerless victim. Yet, they are often expected to speak about torture when giving testimony for trials, teaching a groups of school children about the recent past, or meeting with international human rights representatives. While the ex presos recognize themselves as victims of state terrorism, they do not want to speak about the torture methods used on them and how they felt while undergoing torture. Instead, they want to speak, and do speak, about their *solidaridad* (solidarity) and *resistencia* (resistance)—before, during, and after their imprisonment. The ex presos are interested in teaching the youth how they survived and how they found ways to subvert the conditions in which they found themselves and fight back against their torturers. They tell these stories in all kinds of situations, including at memorialized spaces—and the ex presos believe time has come to share these aspects of their experience to rejuvenate interest in political and social movements among youth by focusing on memories of solidarity and resistance.

I am defining resistance as the ways in which the ex presos continued to stand against oppression even as the military increasingly restricted their freedom in prison. Solidarity, a word that has particular significance in Latin American leftist groups for its expression of commitment to a political project and political actors, is an active form of “being there” for one's *compañeros*. For example, *compañeros* sought each other out in the most inhumane conditions—after torture

sessions, for instance—to offer help or moral support. The ex presos repeatedly emphasize these two values, solidarity and resistance, in tours, at meetings, in writings, and during public presentations. The definitions I use are based on my observations and analysis of stories told by the ex presos.

In prison, even though the prisoners faced death, they found ways to protest, to communicate, to take care of each other, and survive the brutality. Even in the most restrictive conditions, the ex presos found ways around the rules.

To illustrate how the ex presos' narratives of their imprisonment differ from the “traditional” descriptions of what took place inside the camps and prisons, this chapter examines the way ex presos discuss their imprisonment in their oral history archive interviews. While a few discussed the types of torture they were subjected to, the majority of those interviewed spoke about the broader political context or the ways in which they survived through resistance and solidarity with other fellow prisoners. In this chapter, I illustrate just how radically different the stories of imprisonment that the ex presos tell today are from the testimonies contained in *Nunca Más* and other institutionalized narratives of what happened at CCDs and to the victims of torture and illegal detainment.

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The ex presos' stories not only depart from the dominant narratives of the past but they are also gendered. In each of the oral history archive interviews, I asked the ex presos to speak about their lives starting with where they were born, to how they were raised, and what their family lives were like, and continue tracing their histories to their political awakening and involvement. From there the conversations turned to their eventual detention, their experiences during their imprisonment, and then their lives since. In general, they all spoke about history,

but the women spoke about it from the perspectives of their own lives, while the men, many of them using the pronoun “we,” spoke in grand narratives, in which they played a part of a larger story. As a result, I heard the most specific stories of resistance, humor, and solidarity in prison from the women. But I did find that men, in their own ways, spoke about their lives in prison in relation to other *compañeros*; indeed, I thought that perhaps their speaking in such grand narrative terms was their way more broadly placing themselves in solidarity with others more broadly. Interestingly, men spoke about traumatic moments in prison—when the military selected men to be executed, for example—from an individual level perspective, but conducted the rest of their interviews from an impersonal perspective.

It was the opposite, generally speaking, with the women. The women spoke about their time in prison as if they were always part of a community. The grand narratives rarely existed—some spoke about the bigger political project that the left was involved in during the 70s and 80s--but they always rooted that history within their own, very personal lives. While women professed to share a more collective sense of identity with other women prisoners, they also spoke in ways that asserted their individualized identities during other parts of the interview. The men also employed their sense of a collectivity—being part of the larger trajectory of history—and when recalling horrific moments from prison, they spoke as solitary individuals observing others. In other words, there were observable differences in the memories that fell along gender lines, but the aspects that defined each gender’s manner of storytelling was not specific to the gender at all times throughout the interviews.

Discovering that the *ex presos* told their histories in this highly gendered way at first made me uncomfortable. It seemed extremely stereotypical and I originally attempted to avoid it, subtly urging the men to speak more personally and gently pushing women to offer some

historical context. However, it became very clear that what I was seeing was a definite trend—so much so that another *ex presa*, Ely, who was in charge of creating a documentary of the prison UP1, said she had noticed it, too. Ely found that men spoke about history, often teaching the listener about major events and historical figures, while the women spoke about their personal politics. In filming the documentary, Ely has created a type of narrative that engages in collective storytelling, sometimes with gender-separate and sometimes gender-integrated groups. What makes her storytelling technique remarkable is the way in which the speakers tell the story together—one person begins and another joins, and so on, filling in details along the way. It is a collective story. One person begins and another joins, and so on. One story is told by multiple tellers together, at the same time and in the same place. In this way, Ely ensures equal participation and gathers both gendered views in the stories she collects.

In their introduction, the editors of the fourth volume of the *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories* reveal the consistent finding, based on anecdotal evidence, that memory is gendered (Leydesdorff, Passerini and Thompson 1996). The editors do not draw definitive conclusions on how each sex remembers, but they acknowledge that men and women do remember in ways that create narratives that are clearly gendered (Leydesdorff et al., 1996:14). In addition, it is impossible to universalize based upon the gendered differences found within one cultural setting and differences within one gender may vary more than between men and women (1996:2). Here is how they approach studying their own anecdotal evidence that differences exist between how men and women remember:

Above all, we would argue that in order to understand how memory becomes gendered we need to take detours through the realms of gendered experience and gendered language. The categories of experience and language are formulated within the frames of subjectivity and intersubjectivity: hence, when we refer to a women's experiences as the basis of memories different from a man's, we mean an experience as lived by the individual subject and defined in her terms—an experience reconstructed by the

protagonist, and transmitted to other willing to listen. And for us, to hope to understand we must begin by listening (Leydesdorff et al., 1994:14).

The differences I found in the oral history archive interviews most likely reflect the fact that women and men did experience the past differently. In the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, women may have participated in guerrilla movements but societal conceptions of a woman's role still placed her firmly in the home. During my fieldwork in 2008 and 2009, I was struck, as a young American woman, how stereotypically gendered I found Argentine culture to be. For example, after a meal, women—no matter if they were in their 50s or their 20s—invariably stood up, cleared the table and did the dishes, while the men sat back and relaxed. Men would regularly verbally harass passing women in the streets. It was also common to see groups of men hanging out together at a bar; women chatting in a group at a coffee shop was just as ordinary a sight. There were clear lines that divided men and women. And yet, I do not transpose these stereotypical behaviors onto the interviews, though I am aware of the extremely gendered nature of Argentine culture. I am also cognizant of the fact that I am myself a young woman and that my identity affects the interactions I have with the former political prisoners. It is possible that the women shared more personal stories with me because I am also another woman, and that the men felt uncomfortable speaking across gender lines. Or the fact that I was considerably younger than the former political prisoners could have been a barrier to those who felt that I could not understand their experiences. That I am American, for that matter, could also have had an impact on the ways the ex presos chose to tell their stories. In addition, I built closer relationships with some ex presos, while others remained more distant. The tensions within the groups also affected my relationships despite my attempts to remain neutral and maintain positive relationships with everyone. At some point, during a fight amongst the AEPPC members, I was perceived to be on one particular side, and I believe this affected the quality of

my interviews with people of the “opposing” side. All of these factors impacted the length and quality of the interviews. By “quality” I mean how much I felt each person revealed, an ambiguous but no less real characterization that was, I am convinced, strongly impacted by the varying levels of trust I was able to build with each person. On the other hand, because it was known to all that these interviews were also going to be collected in an oral history archive, each person was aware that he or she was telling their life story in a way that he or she wanted to be remembered.

The analysis that follows of excerpts from the oral history archive interviews is not solely focused on gendered memories. I point out the distinction as it may become readily apparent to the reader, and to acknowledge a finding I discovered while conducting the interviews. These stories are featured here, though, to illustrate the fact that neither male nor female former political prisoners—when speaking about their time in prison specifically—recount many stories of torture or suffering (if any). They instead speak about resistance and solidarity. This is a significant contrast to the narratives collected in the 1984 truth commission report as well as the ones retold by tour guides who are non-survivors at the former sites of CCDs. The former political prisoners wish to convey a different image of themselves in these spaces, other than the widely disseminated picture of weak, powerless, and docile victims.

### **Viviana: Personal History as Lived Experience**

With the exception of a few interviews, the ex presos did not speak extensively about the torture they endured in prison. While they did speak about the conditions in which they lived in, they stressed instead how they survived and lived through the challenges of being isolated and deprived. One particular ex presa made a conscious decision to tell me stories about resistance and black humor, because she knew I was already familiar with the multiple torture methods

employed and the horrifying personal stories of most of the *compañeros*. Viviana Vergara's stories were told from her point of view, but I heard the same or similar tales from other *ex presos*, and these accounts represent the multiple ways in which they resisted the conditions they endured in prison, and how they expressed solidarity with each other.

One of the most surprising elements of my fieldwork is the degree to which the *ex presos* indulged in black humor when speaking about their time in prison. They did not break down and weep, or speak at length of the major and minor difficulties they faced. Instead, when we would gather for coffee or meet for a committee meeting, often a *compañero* would recall something humorous that had happened while they were detained. Someone would recall a story and elicit laughter from the others. Later, while typing up my fieldnotes, I would be struck by how profoundly sad or terrible the events were in the story, though at the time I was listening, I was able to see the black humor at the time—in part because I was listening to it with others and being affected by the others' reactions. For majority of the AEPPC members, they are for the first time able to tell these stories and be understood because an organization like the one they formed never existed before, and speaking about their pasts in other contexts was taboo. In public, the whole topic of the dictatorship was off-limits, but the most ill-advised subject to bring up, when talking about the recent past, were the “*guerrillas*.” So, when they gather now for AEPPC gatherings or at rallies, the *ex presos* have the opportunity to reminisce together, or to ask someone for a missing detail, or to see if others had similar experiences. And sometimes they just want to tell a good story, be heard, and understood.

During my interview with Viviana, she told me several stories from her time in various CCDs. After suffering through numerous, severe torture sessions at La Perla over the course of

a month, and over five additional days at La Rivera, Viviana then was transferred to UP1. She recalled the first time she saw herself in a mirror:

Well, in the prison, in the penitentiary, there was a lot of comradeship. A lot of solidarity with the compañeras. We shared absolutely everything. When I arrived they were using very limited eyebrow tweezers. Having spent so much time imprisoned and without plucking we developed very thick eyebrows! (laughing) There's a guy I don't know if you know Manolito, a Spanish guy Manolito. [She is referring to a torturer.] Then the girls afterward built up my confidence. They knew that I was a person that had suffered like them. They passed me a can that was really a weapon, a top of a milk can, that was used like a mirror, because the military was already in place in '76, and I fell [into the hands of the military] in '77. In '76 there had been a confiscation from the jailers. That is to say they had taken everything that had any value, from money that the girls had to books--there had been a total cleaning. And there had been a need to rescue eyebrow tweezers, with the top of the milk can that functioned as a mirror. At this point I still had bruises, bruises all over. So when the girls passed it to me so that I could tweeze--and this was very kind. They passed me the top of the milk can as the mirror, and when I looked, I could see that I was all black, all purple, all darkened, I looked at the mirror and I said, "Milico son of a bitch, they gave me my first wrinkle!" (laughing) Out of everything they had done to my body, I was entirely vain. This just set them all off laughing, because it was a reaction totally unpredictable (Interview VV, 8/26/2008).

In the prison, because Viviana was no longer in total isolation as she had been in La Perla and La Rivera, she was able to communicate with the other female political prisoners, even though they were each in their own individual cells. As women, they took care to look after their hairy eyebrows, using whatever means possible. In each cell, every woman was given a milk can into which they were expected to urinate and defecate. At a particular point in the day, they were allowed to empty it. But, the women found that they were able to use the top of the can as a mirror. Even with seemingly nothing in their cells—nothing but a milk can, really—they were able to fashion small pieces of metal to use as tweezers. Because Viviana was new, because she had obviously been beaten and tortured, the others sought to help her by allowing her to pluck her eyebrows. Having the milk-can-cover mirror and tweezers was a privilege. Even the first moment when Viviana first saw her reflection and understood the extent of what had been done to her, she turned that moment into an opportunity for resistance, by making a joke about her



tortured, battered body, providing a moment of laughter for her new companions as well. In these small interactions, the prisoners were able to resist and show solidarity by helping the others take care of their eyebrows, by not breaking down at the sight of their damaged bodies, the prisoners were able to resist and show solidarity.

To better understand the importance of reaching out to one another in prison, Viviana describes the living conditions of the prison cells at UP1 and how the military attempted to cut off one prisoner from another:

Another anecdote that I have from the prison, I am going to tell you simple things, because I suppose that the tough things you already know. We women were very isolated from each other, but we sought each other out to talk to one another. That is to say that there had been, in '75, a prison break from Buen Pastor that was run by nuns. That ended in a massive prison break, so what did they do with every political prisoner that fell after that prison break, they changed the prison blocks to maximum security, for common prisoners they changed because of us, and [the prison cells] were niches. They were truly little niches, really small. I remember the proportions. I think they were two [meters] by two [meters], making the most of the physical space. That is to say that a bunk, a cement bunk bed, individual cells, holes in the wall, cement bunk beds. One was on top and one was on the bottom, side by side. We had light, a white light, fluorescent tube it's called, a strong light, permanently shining in our eyes. The doors permanently closed. We were cut off from each other, and the light permanently in our eye that gave us visual problems. All of us needed glasses during our time in the prison. We ended up with a need for glasses because it produced infections, but we searched for each other (Interview VV, 8/26/2008).

Viviana remembered how the female prisoners sought each other out despite the attempts to separate them. Although they were relieved to have left other CCDs like La Perla and La Rivera, where the conditions were even worse, where captives were repeatedly tortured, living in UP1 was also a form of physical and psychological torture. Several compañeros spoke about how the constant exposure to fluorescent light was a form of torture that damaged their sight, disrupted their sleep, and created a feeling that they were constantly being watched in their cells. Despite these conditions, Viviana continued to describe the sense of solidarity the prisoners sought to

create amongst themselves, and how their solidarity was a form of resistance—as they sought ways to overcome the individual isolation that the military tried to impose on them physically.

We had a spyhole, which supposedly was how they would pass food to the common prisoners. For us they opened the door for a moment. Through this spyhole they saw what we were doing while we were in the cell. We were closed in for practically 22 hours, because they gave you one hour to eat, or one hour and a half for lunch. It seemed to me that we had liberty even though we were locked in all day. We didn't get out to any patio. And we shared everything, absolutely everything. That is to say the *compañero* that...the parents sent us, we couldn't see, but they sent us everything that we had asked them for. Medicines, cotton—for menstruation we didn't use anything but cotton. There was a need for them so we had to go about giving out and sharing to those who were most in need. Whoever had the most would give to whoever needed it the most, it was all like this, how the prison service was organized. And the medicine was in need for... the parents sent us everything, they were desperate, the medication was given to those wanted it, *paratropina*. If you had a gall bladder problem, they would give *paratropina* that was like an aspirin, do you get what I am telling you? (Interview VV, 8/26/2008).

In this passage, Viviana described how the political prisoners communicated with each other in UP1. It was essentially like the game “telephone” in which one person starts passing a word or phrase to a second person, who in turn repeats it to a third person...and it continues this way, down the line. Just as in the game, the messages the prisoners sent sometimes got bungled, but it was how they communicated with each other from their isolated cells. There were three floors of forty individual cells on each block.

In addition, while prisoners could eventually receive packages from their families, no one package could provide enough of anything. Every package went through inspection and not all of the contents reached the intended recipient. The military did not always notify the public of the internment of every political prisoner, and some families did not have the same financial means as others. As a result, the women prisoners—there were 120 of them—would share the contents of their packages, paying particularly attention to those who were in need. Viviana explained in detail how the women helped each other:

[T]here were *compañeros* who were very strong, very solid. I considered myself a *compañera* who was a strong *compañera* because I would see *compañeras* who were really depressed, who didn't speak, who had no amusement, very closed in on themselves. So the group of *compañeras* who were more solid in a certain way, we always tried to speak with them, to restrain them, to help them. There were grave problems, there were *compañeras* whose children had been taken. They didn't know where they were. Others had their *compañeros* killed. Well, situations that were very...others didn't want to know anything, they were still distrustful and they didn't speak to anyone. But in every way we tried to be in solidarity about everything, and to be happy—taking every opportunity to laugh about something to make us laugh, to imitate someone, to have parties, theatre, we made the most out of any opportunities—which was during the hour we ate (Interview VV, 8/26/2008).

The *compañeras* who were faring better physically, psychologically, and emotionally would seek to help the most vulnerable—those who needed support to get through prison life. Even those who refused to be spoken to, the *compañeras* attempted to reach them. And even in the bleakest conditions, the prisoners would stage plays and entertain each other. Even in between torture sessions, while living in fear of being executed, they still found ways to make each other laugh, and that is a memory that the former political prisoners often speak about when recalling their time in prison.

Once Viviana remembered the women prisoners once staged a protest to allow them to keep their doors open longer so that they could spend more time with each other. Since there was little recourse, they demanded to speak with the Third Army Corps General Menéndez and further showed their resoluteness by refusing to get up:

One day we planted ourselves at the bottom of the doors of our cells and refused to go into our cells. We remained sitting at the door so that the prison guards could not close the doors because we were planted there and we stayed like this. Some of the *compañeros* said, “You are all crazy.” (laughing) “How are you going to ask Menéndez to come?” That was right. But there were *compañeras* that had gone through terrible things. They had already taken out *compañeros* who were prisoners there, men and women were taken out to be executed, they had also taken some out of the prison to do mock executions outside (Interview VV, 8/26/2008).

For many of the ex presos, stories like the women protesting at UP1 demonstrated their enduring identities as activists, as those rebelling against the system. These women were demanding to see the general who had ordered all of the disappearances and killings in Córdoba Province, who presumably had no sympathy for those he considered to be subversive. Yet, the women understood that to make changes in the prison, they needed to see the top authority. Despite the fact that there had already been executions, the women still protested their isolation simply by refusing to enter their tiny cells.

According to Viviana, there were 29 deaths at the prison in 1976—all people who were taken out of their cells at UP1 and shot. The military made it look like there was some sort of confrontation, but in reality, the officers had simply put them in a truck and then shot them at point-blank range. For the women prisoners who had witnessed this, the idea of protesting and asking to see Menéndez was “crazy.” In the end, Viviana said, a police chief (*gendarmerie*) came in place and supposedly took their message of wanting to keep the cell doors open to Menéndez. He told them to enter their cells for now and that he would pass along the request and would not punish them. At 4:00 in the morning, the *gendermerie* returned and sought out six compañeras. Viviana was among them and they were taken out to the patio. It was the first time Viviana saw the outside, the patio. The *gendarmerie* proceeded to conduct a mock execution. When they asked why they were being punished, they were told that they were responsible for the uprising. Afterward, these six compañeras were put in isolation away from the rest of the prisoners.

Viviana remembered the education she received in prison, a comment echoed by other former political prisoners who believed they learned more during their time in prison about certain subjects—politics, in particular—than they had in school.

We also gave classes in a particular way in this prison. We searched for this in the mornings. There was a writer. There was a girl who was a student of film and she knew so much about film. There was another who was a professor of languages. Another knew about accounting. So what did we do: We put on our blankets, and one gave classes while the guards were far away. One gave a class to everyone else. The voice would pass through the hallway because the individual cells were next to each other. There were twenty on one side and twenty on the other. So one spoke in a loud voice and everyone listened. Whoever wanted to, listened. Some were in no condition to listen, they didn't want to learn. We listened. I learned. There was a lecture about books that I had never read in my life that I know through the stories of these compañeras, books by Borges, Roberto Arlt, Maréchal, and also I know about movies that I have never seen through what the compañeras had told me. It was all told orally. We had absolutely nothing, except combs (Interview VV, 8/26/2008).

Through the small hole that went through the prison cells, voices traveled through and the compañeras built a learning community, without any materials. Since nearly all of the prisoners were educated and many of them were bonafide intellectuals, they were able to share their expertise and teach others about their own areas of expertise. To teach others required solidarity among all of the prisoners, even those who were not interested in learning because it required collaborative silence to allow the voice to travel.

Toward the end, Viviana remarked that they had nothing in their cells but their combs. But even with their combs, the prisoners found another creative use for them: using individual teeth as needles. Using strings from their sheets, towels, and clothes, they created knitted objects. Similarly, they would save bones from their food to use them as either needles or to make them into small objects. They would share extra threads or “needles.” In this way, the former political prisoners found ways to survive by occupying themselves with small projects, and even turning in circles in their tiny cells to prevent circulation problems.

### **Juan Carlos: Grand history in place of personal history**

In contrast to Viviana—whose stories were echoed by other women who remembered the compañeras teaching each other and protesting together—Juan Carlos Alvarez's discussion of

his time in prison was representative of how many of the men spoke about Argentine history with the implicit assumption that they too are part of that larger history. The solidarity that Juan Carlos spoke about in his interview referred to his time before prison, when he was a factory worker and a committed Peronist. Still, in the AEPPC meetings, and in discussions about the book *Eslabones* and while leading tours around former CCDs, the men also speak about resistance and solidarity. Thus, the same two themes are emphasized and valued but are expressed differently in the interviews. Juan Carlos, unlike Viviana, did not speak explicitly from his personal perspective, but instead spoke of himself as being part of a larger collective. For Juan Carlos and the others, the history lessons were less about teaching me or other youth, and more about placing themselves in the larger history; and perhaps for the men, this is how they found their sense of solidarity—with the broader left, not only with those in prison with them.

Well, the militancy practically... I believe that my militancy began after, let's say, I had followed the Catholic Church—there it started, with the solidarity, without me realizing it. There was simply nothing that was more about charity and solidarity; that it went—it was all work. A lot of time passed, many years, of learning, of knowing more about people, of being in contact with poverty. After came the youth who came from institutes or the middle class that started to have contact with poverty. That created a lot more enthusiasm. That gave us the intellectual part, we came to know the theory of the third world, this from the third world priests (Interview JA, 2/25/2009).

Juan Carlos, like many other ex presos, was heavily influenced by his volunteer work in poor neighborhoods through the Catholic Church. Like other leftist movements developing around the same time in Europe and in the U.S., members of the middle class, university students, and intellectuals also heavily influenced and shaped critiques of poverty. Among the disappeared and in the leftist movements broadly in Argentina during the '70s were a mix of people from the working and middle classes. In Latin America, the third world movement sparked wide social movements in support of more socialist models that were opposed by

military dictatorships throughout the region. Through his involvement with the church, Juan Carlos joined the Peronist movement because, “it had the character of being a very big movement where it came from different sectors of society.” In addition, Juan Carlos believed it was the next logical step from his work with the poor: “I also had the characteristic that the political was indispensable; it was necessary.” Part of his motivation for joining the Peronist movement was his view of the movement as a part of Argentina’s history: Perón, for Juan Carlos, was following in the footsteps of national heroes like San Martín, for example.

I mean the middle class were the ones who showed us what we were doing and teaching in schools, listening to this through some media of communication, and we came to understand another part of the history, the revisionist history of politics. For example, the other part, well, to study a little of the Latin American questions that came up a lot, because Peronism had its Christian conception, profoundly humanistic and Latin American. These three concepts increased our knowledge, and gave us major possibilities for others to enter like we did, to take it seriously, to make more commitments, and to know more about everything (Interview JA, 2/25/2009).

Because of his active involvement in the Cordobazo, the joint labor and university uprising against then military dictator General Orgaía, Juan Carlos was detained several times beginning in 1969, but was eventually released each time. Then in 1974 while coming home from his factory work at Renault, the military closed in on him for his involvement in the labor movement. Juan Carlos was detained for eight and half years, which was followed by six months of libertad vigilada after his release, in April 1983.

In line with the grand historical narrative, Juan Carlos explained his own “fall” in relation to other major historical figures. In his interview, he explained that when Peron returned from exile, the leftist Peronists were no longer considered to be a part of the larger movement. When Peron died a year after his return in 1974, his third wife became president and during her tenure, the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance began detaining, torturing, and killing political dissidents. The violence against leftist Peronists then spurred armed guerrilla movements in an

act of self-defense. But the military had far greater numbers and power and quickly were able to execute top leaders, dismantle guerrilla groups, and disappear thousands who were suspected of subversion.

That [anti-leftist Peronist violence] brought about a huge conflict that led to the radicalization of our struggles. FARC had already united with the Montoneros, and well, we had to go underground. In the factory where I was for less than a year, in 1974 they had assassinated Atilio Lopez who was the vice governor of Córdoba—the one who suffered from the coup d’etat here was the vice governor and Obregón Cano who was the governor, they were connected to the Peronist youth, or more accurately they were identified with the Peronist youth. Then the right took over the government in Córdoba, by the name Navarrazo, an institutional coup d’etat here in Córdoba. Then began a ferocious repression, when they killed Atilio Lopez, many labor leaders died, they started with prosecutions and we got to November ’74, when they decreed a state siege, the week of the state siege I fell prisoner (Interview JA, 2/25/2009).

Córdoba was particularly hard hit with military repression because of its historic importance in developing one of the most powerful labor movements, as well as being the center of left-leaning intellectual activity. The 1969 Cordobazo inspired other protests throughout Argentina, and in response, the military sought to depose the labor leaders who held positions of power. Juan Carlos positions his detention in relation to the death of one of the most high-profile figures in Córdoba’s labor movement, Atilio Lopez. Rather than speaking about the particulars of his activities in his labor union that landed him in prison, Juan Carlos instead speaks about the broader picture of repression in Córdoba.

However, like Viviana, when Juan Carlos remembered his experience in prison, he created an image of community that was forged out of joint suffering.

In Villa Devoto, I was there about a year and it was also full. There had been transfers in the permanent sense. [The “transfers” ended in death.] And after, with another group, we were taken to another prison. Nobody knew exactly where they were taking us, they just told us directly, “Prepare your stuff.” And they took us, generally it was done at night. They loaded you into an airplane and took you. We appeared in Resistencia, in Chaco, a province up north in our country, a very hot climate. There were many compañeros from many provinces. And there we were affected by the government overthrow in ’76. I was in different prison blocks because the regime allowed us in a certain manner to organize



ourselves. Whatever we organized was always in a way so that we had studies, schedules, gymnastics, we had recreation, more internal patio space to a certain degree, to walk inside the prison blocks, opening the cells. The food was always bad, but we got to have visits. And I would go to various prison blocks out of the necessity to organize, one always responded to the organizations that said, “You better go over there, ask to pass through.” And they would allow you to pass, so I was in three prison blocks, the last one was the fourth were I was for several years, and because I was taken in December (Interview JA, 2/25/2009).

Juan Carlos remembered what it was like to live in prison before 1976—when the repression was not at its most severe, when guards allowed the prisoners a certain degree of freedom. When the military overthrew Isabel Perón, however, the conditions in the prison changed drastically.

In the middle of December of ’76, they took out a group of *compañeros*, that was known as the Margarita Belen massacre. Before the military had entered, there had been a seizure of everything, they took us all out to the patio, and they seized everything. They didn’t take—except the chess game—they took our pencils, radios, letters, some things. We had taken a precaution to hide things, to make tubes in the walls, in a certain place. Because we saw that the repression was coming on strong, so we hid some things. When the seizure came and the army entered, and when we back to our prison bloc we no longer had radio, we lacked a lot of things, correspondence, and we were left with our tubes that we called it, our little hideouts with some pencils that’s what we had. For example, smoking paper, we had tobacco, and we used the rolling paper to write things on, something that interested us, and with this we continued to study, and the regime became very harsh. We lived practically closed in, they took us out very little. The food was bad as always (Interview JA, 2/25/2009).

While Juan Carlos did not recall specific individuals or particular events in which the fellow prisoners worked together, it was implied that as a collective they knew to hide a few things. They also found ways to overcome the increasing restrictions on their daily lives, and persisted in their desire to teach and learn from each other.

In an essay on how women and men recalled past conversations, Richard Ely and Alyssa McCabe found that “women can recall personal events more fully and vividly than men” (1996:3). More specifically, they state that: “People in women’s stories have names, and they sit around and talk; people in men’s stories are more often nameless, and their environment is more silent.” (1996:20). Viviana remembered the milk tin can and the words she uttered after seeing

her reflection. In addition, Viviana recalled the specific fields that the other female prisoners taught and some of the books she remembered hearing about decades after her release. Juan Carlos also spoke about how he and his fellow prisoners organized activities but did so without offering any specifics. He did not recall some people refusing to participate, as Viviana did. In addition, Juan Carlos said that they wrote things on rolling paper and studied together, but did not mention the specific topics of either the writings or the studies. And while this is simply a comparison of two individual interviews, they are representative of general trends among the men and women. Thus, both speak about solidarity and resistance in their recollections, although their memories differ in distinct ways. Like the executions that took place at UP1, Juan Carlos was present in the prison when a group of men were taken and executed—though the incident was made to look like a confrontation with the military in order to publicly justify the killings:

It was December 13 when they took out a group of *compañeros*. We were put against the prison bars so that we couldn't leave. We tried to negotiate, and the official walked there in the prison saying, "It's better if you leave because the army is going to enter and they are going to take you out and it's going to be worse." And we started to communicate by yelling with the *compañeros* of prison block one, with prison block two, looking for another explanation, some kind of negotiation. And with prison block one we let them leave. We had no other way of avoiding the older ones. We started to communicate with the other prison blocks through the window. Every cell had a window, with this case, we couldn't communicate with our hands, but in situations like these we were screaming. It was in the desperate situations because we were waiting for the worst, from our prison block they took our four *compañeros*, or other prison blocks...I don't remember the total. I think it was something like 13 in total (Interview JA, 2/25/2009).

Since each cell had a window the prisoners were able to use sign language, unlike in UP1, where they only had a peephole. But when the guards came for some prisoners for a "transfer" it was likely that they were going to be executed. In some cases, prisoners were actually transferred to other prisons—in Juan Carlos passed through several prisons before being released. In Juan Carlos's description, however, one can sense the desperation and fear that came with any one of the prisoners being taken.

Later on, when new prisoners entered the cells, they found out what had happened to the people who were taken that night. While the prisoners were loaded in a truck, they opened the door while they were en route and shot them in a city that was called Margarita Belen. The military stated that the prisoners were attempting an escape and in response they shot them. But the prisoners who survived, the ex presos believe that the transfers, were executed. And while execution was obviously the worst fate that befell any prisoner, generally speaking, after the transition to the military dictatorship, the prisoners lost all privileges within the prison.

Pedro is another male former political prisoner who began his oral history archival interview speaking at length about political history before turning to his own prison experience. Sitting alongside me was Ely who was listening in on the interview. Pedro and his wife had invited Ely and me for a weekend asado and to record his interview. When I had interviewed Ely, Pedro had also stopped by and sat in on the interview. In this way it was symmetrical in that Pedro heard Ely's testimony and participated in her presentation for the oral history archive, and when it came time for Pedro to offer his testimony, Ely was also present.

Pedro currently works as a journalist and does not actively attend the AEPPC meetings, though he once did. He no longer is interested in being involved in work relating to the past dictatorship, neither with the AEPPC nor with Familiares. (Two of his siblings and a brother-in-law of Pedro's all remain disappeared.) Still, Pedro remains close with many former political prisoners, including Ely. During our interview, Pedro seemed very reluctant to share stories about his time in prison. And awhile in general, I tried not to ask too many questions during interviews, because I wanted the ex presos to direct the conversations. I also wanted them to talk about their own personal trajectories—not only about their time in prison, but about their life

histories. This exchange took place when, in my interview with Pedro, I attempted to redirect the conversation:

**Rebekah:** Let's continue with your life.

**Pedro:** Well, my life...

**Rebekah:** You know, the men always talk about politics.

**Pedro:** No, it's because that's the explanation.

**Rebekah:** No, but I've noticed that women—because I've done about thirty interviews—that the women always tell their own stories but the men talk about context and politics. It's difficult to get them to talk about their own stories.

**Ely:** We too talk about history, but from our point of view.

**Pedro:** Well my life at this moment. I tell you, I work, and I try to have a normal life. I always had a normal life. I have always been like this, always taking on family burdens, trying to be coherent, to have a family and to be militants because if you don't resolve problems in your family, you're not going to solve problems in society. And I always worked and worked until my detention (Interview PG, 11/9/2008).

Pedro was detained on October 20, 1976. During his initial abduction, he was shot five times around the groin after he hit one of the people trying to kidnap him. One of the clearest memories Pedro has of his kidnapping came later, hearing his wife's voice, of her crying, when she was also detained and brought into D2, where he was being held. But instead of leaving Pedro to die from the bullets wounds, the military took him to a hospital for surgery. Pedro was in a coma for about six days; when he woke up, the military took him back to D2. His wounds became infected while he was at D2; the military then transferred Pedro to La Perla, where he was beaten. Pedro believed he was going to die at La Perla, but then the torturers demanded that he be bathed because he was so filthy. The person in charge of bathing him, Pedro recalled, was a girl he recognized from Córdoba, (she later denied it was her) and he said that this girl told him

that he was going to be saved, because the military was transferring him to La Ribera. Pedro remembered his transfer and seeing people at La Ribera.

They took me with another prisoner to Camp La Ribera, with someone who complained a lot, and died a few days later. Someone with the last name Soria, and I also learned that they had killed Onoren, as declared by a girl, Mohamed. In La Ribera, I was there for 15 days until they healed my wounds. There was a doctor who had been kidnapped but went around without blindfolds, who is now the Secretary of Culture of Cosquin, Ruben Acosta. He was a doctor. He had some political background but was not blindfolded (Interview PG, 11/9/2008).

Pedro was later transferred to UPI, and would also pass through several other CCDs, sometimes leaving and then returning back to the same places, including Sierra Chica, Rawson, La Plata, Villa Devoto, and Caseros. He spent eight and half years in total in prison. Like Juan Carlos, Pedro spoke at length about Argentine history before turning to speak about his own life.

Well, a little to tell you about history, let's say, or a part of my life history, it all has to do with, how they would now say, a political foundation of violence. Fundamentally, this is what is always in the discussion. One always does a kind of survey or study or interview. Well, violence in Argentina is old. I would say as old as the skimmer [kitchen utensil to sift sugar]. I believe the violence in Argentina started with the elimination of the indigenous. After that, we continued with the elimination of the gaucho. What had happened to the gauchos is that they were already resisting the taking of the national land. To give you an example, there was a crisis in 1820 where caudillos [political strongmen] appeared in different provinces. Then this gaucho type, that Sarmiento painted in his book *Facundo*. It was them that resisted the invasion after the May Revolution where we constituted Argentina a free country. The gauchos resisted the invasion, particularly over the national resources. In my case, I was born in Chilecito, La Rioja Province (Interview PG, 11/9/2008).

In telling his own life story, Pedro recounts pre-independence Argentine history. He speaks about the violence against him and his compañeros as being a continuation of violence in generations past, against the indigenous and gauchos. La Rioja, Pedro explains, had an abundance of natural resources and the land there was sought out by miners for its minerals. Pedro continues to talk about other major events in Argentine history that he felt related to his own personal formation.

The second instance of violence that shaped the country was the profound change that came from the crisis in the '30s. There was the Tragic Week massacre where the workers were reprimanded at the Basena factory, and a lot of people died. Then later came the patriotic leagues, the oligarchy's armed groups. They would become the Triple A in the '70s—the Argentina Anti-Communist Alliance. During that previous era, the patriotic leagues fulfilled this function and well, civilians went out and killed workers. And after that, another major violent event—this has to do with my life because when I was ten years old in 19—I was 11 years old in 195—I went to Buenos Aires, and there had been a failure with Peron. That is, the bombings in Plaza de Mayo, I remember. I remember when the news reached us that a bomb had been thrown on a trolleybus and children died. This left an impact on me. And when I got to Buenos Aires there were executions on June 9, 1956; they shot General Valle in prison, and they shot several civilians, some were disposed in garbage dumps in Leon Suarez. And this really affected me, because I knew the Lizaso family, I knew them circumstantially in that era. Carlitos Lizaso was editing a newspaper; he was a young man. They shot him in a garbage dump in Leon Suarez. This, from a kid's eyes, made a definitive mark (Interview PG, 11/9/2008).

Pedro spoke about political history and connected to it to his own life and development as an activist. Or as Pedro explained, for him, this was the key to explaining his life story and his detention. Argentina's history has long been marked by violence, particularly against those who resisted the oligarchy, the right, and military leaders. I believe the men find themselves—and see their fellow compañeros—as standing in solidarity with past Argentine and Latin American historical figures and movements. They feel they are part of a larger historical trajectory, and their time in prison was a small part of it, the result of a risk that they took for following a political affiliation at odds with those in power.

### **Surviving Prison**

The ex presos I interviewed told stories that revolved around the themes of resistance and solidarity. For the AEPPC these are the memories that are most important; these are what they remember, and what they want to be remembered for—not as helpless victims. While there was not one clear set of themes that emerged cleanly among all the interviews, I did find at least four types of stories about how prisoners resisted and expressed solidarity during their detention, and

they frequently overlapped with each other: community building, non-collaboration, education, and mental care.

### **Community Building**

Even though the military sought to separate the prisoners and to turn one against another through a combination of physical and psychological torture as well as by using isolation cells, the former political prisoners continued to find innovative ways to communicate with each other and to create a sense of regularity, control, and organization amongst themselves. Ex presos contend that one of the goals of the dictatorship's state terrorism was to create a culture of individualism to pave the way for the introduction of capitalist economic policies. Yet, in response, they continued to resist this cultural dominance by building a sense of community. This community was for many *compañeros* the ultimate sign of solidarity because without each other, survival would have been next to impossible.

Similar to Juan Carlos' description of how the male prisoners played games and visited each other in prison prior to the 1976 coup, Atilio Basso also spoke about the ways the men created order, or a sense of it, while in prison. Most of the widely disseminated narratives of victims in prison are focused on torture and the abject conditions they lived in, but many ex presos spoke about the ways they organized themselves within the prison despite the myriad of restrictions imposed on them. Working with each other was a form of solidarity and resistance because as a collective they could help each other and feel less lonely. Atilio, who was imprisoned for a year starting in 1975, remembered the privileges changing for prisoners after the military took power. He explained why it was important for political prisoners to find ways to remain in contact with each other.

Even in prison—the political prisoners—we organized ourselves. We held workshops on handicrafts with wood and leather, and we studied, exercised, did sports—we organized

everything ourselves. And we had, you know, regular visits with our friends and family—that was before. But after the coup, the first thing they did was hold us *incomunicado* and then they deprived us in every aspect. Before there had been studying, radios, televisions, medicines, clothes and all kinds of furnishings; we even owned a change of clothes. Then they prohibited every type of shared activity between the prisoners: exercise, hygiene, et cetera. It changed because they took charge of the prison—the military directly—and they passed rules that were very dehumanizing. The windows were permanently shut; the prison cells were closed all day. And well, every type of activity was made private. For us the prison symbolized, above all else, isolation from our families, from our work *compañeros*, and of course, from our militant *compañeros*. That was the first objective of a prisoner, to recover his freedom, and to have that human contact. The most significant relationship was with our loved ones and our militant *compañeros*, we looked to them for any visits, letters, correspondences. We made the most out of the injustice, in order to study, to improve our physical state. And well, after the coup, it changed. Attitude was more important than anything; to try to survive and to try to maintain our sanity. The political stance was to say, “No matter what, we had to get out of prison or else we would be dead—even if we went crazy or were fucked—that is what we would tell ourselves (Interview AB 10/23/2008).

Atilio pointed out that even with the resistance and solidarity among the prisoners, they expected that the experience might have a long-lasting negative impact on them. Yet, despite living in inhumane conditions, the political prisoners were able to rally around what Atilio calls “the political stance” of survival; orienting themselves around this hope for the future helped them mentally to cope with their situation.

As one of the most outspoken advocates of telling stories of resistance, Ely Eichenberger shared a story about the “hair salon” that the prisoners created in the prison Villa Devoto. Unlike other CCDs, Devoto—which was, more often than not, the last prison in which women were held before being released—was more lax with its rules. Instead of individual cells, there were four prisoners in each cell. In addition, unlike La Perla or La Ribera, families sometimes knew if someone had been sent there because it was a regular prison, and could then send packages to prisoners. Still, the women had to find ways to survive the confinement, after having been away from their families for so long.



I'll tell you a story from Devoto, the 'hair salon.' The salon is one of the things Alba organized; Alba the compañera who is now a delegate from Tucumán in the Association of Former Prisoners. It took a lot out of the women to be far from their children. I think for the men too, but for us it was a terrible thing. So when letters from the children of the compañeras would arrive, it was a tough thing. So the salon was a place, where we made cloths, I mean, with cloths—with newspapers we made rollers. Eh...we prepared 'the chemicals': we prepared a cooked liquid of sugar, and with pieces of old sheets, we would wax our legs. We did facials with cream, for pimples or dry skin, we used creams that came from dermatologists; that's why we requested creams—they were for the salon. Amidst the craziness in a cell of three or two...where one would arrive waxing, the other below doing a massage to another, there we read the letters. That is, it was a space with a lot of restraint. To share letters, and to share with compañeros who were available about children or about the mothers, no? To share letters while we cared for ourselves as women (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

Ely explained that for women who were missing their children, they needed communal support to bear reading the letters. So the women created a space, an ordinary everyday space like a salon where women would socialize and take care of themselves and talk about their families. Within this space, women would read their children's letters and talk about their children with other women, under the pretense of it being a salon. Though they were not with their children, they still cared for themselves and thought and talked about their children, as everyday women might in a salon.

### **Non-Collaboration**

Initially, the guerrillas and committed leftist activists knew that they ran the risk of being captured and detained, but they did not know about or were not prepared for the torture they would undergo. However, as more and more of those around them disappeared, and as survivors came out with testimonies of what had happened to them, compañeros began to learn that they had to develop strategies to withstand torture and not give up names, locations, and organizational information. The ex presos distinguish themselves from collaborators, stating that they did not work with the military and defending themselves from accusations from families of

the disappeared who suspect them for having done something to have lived. By not giving up information to the military, the *compañeros* were resisting; they were resisting the torture, and they were showing solidarity by sacrificing themselves and not naming others.

Prisoners who were part of political organizations were trained not to speak under torture, or in the case of Ester Cabral, who was a member of the Workers Revolutionary Party, or PRT, she was specifically trained on how to resist giving up any names or addresses for at least four days, in order to give her *compañeros* time to escape before the military could pursue them. Before she was kidnapped, Ester had a premonition to run away. Her former partner, Juan Jose, who she also calls “el Negro,” had arrived in Misiones where she was living with a Paraguayan family. Ester was about to flee with him and another *compañera*, but while she was packing, she changed her mind and decided to stay. She was tired of running away; she had a newborn baby, Nora. Shortly thereafter, the military found Ester and abducted her. Ester believes that if she had left Misiones as she had initially intended, she would not have been detained.

Previously in Córdoba, Ester had gone through a similar situation with Negro. Another *compañero* told her that the military was coming after Negro because someone had “sung” under torture and revealed the address of the factory where he worked. Ester went to the factory and told the manager that she needed to see Negro; his father died, she said. Negro came out of the factory crying, and Ester had to explain that what she had said earlier was a lie and that they needed to escape, immediately. They got into a taxi and left Córdoba. That is how they ended up in Misiones, where the tables were essentially turned. (Later, Negro would tell Ester that he wished he had given her an incentive to leave, so that she would not have fallen into the hands of the military.) When she was detained, she was taken with Nora, and was immediately interrogated and tortured for one specific purpose: the military wanted to know Negro’s

whereabouts. Ester remembered hearing Nora screaming while she was being tortured; the military told her that they were torturing her baby.

**Ester:** I don't know how, but at one point, I could—maybe because I'm skinny with small bones—take off the handcuffs. I was always trying to adjust them. I took off my blindfold and I saw a guy in the corner who had her standing up, I mean, they weren't torturing her. It was bad that she had been watching the torture. From there they took her and I didn't hear from her anymore; I didn't hear her nor did they ever tell me where she was or who had her; except when they were tormenting you, like, "She is now being raised by others." And that she wasn't going to be subversive; the family that took her was a military family, and they are going to raise her in the military, all of these things. Well, it had been four or five days like this, systematic beatings, threats that they were going to kill you. We had instructions to withstand it, come what may, for four days.

**Rebekah:** You mean not to talk.

**Ester:** Right, to say absolutely nothing, and later you can admit that you were part of PRT (Worker Revolutionary Party), who you recognize; recall the name of someone that is already dead; try not to say from where you came from—if you came from Córdoba, then say Buenos Aires—to take measures in withholding data, because otherwise they can get data from someone you know in Córdoba. If they electrocute you, you have to name people who are dead. For example, at the time I was taken, a compañera, Clara, had already died, and no one knew who she was. There had been various people whose first and last names came out in the paper, in the year '75. We went through the names of the people who had died, who had been killed, so that the people in the vicinity would have time to get away as far as possible, that they had enough time to find out that you had been detained and run that information so that the people could leave and hide.

After four or five days, the men left me in the hands of a doctor. Because I had been breastfeeding Norita, I developed mastitis. I was all swollen, bruised, in horrific pain. So they sent me to take out my milk. I don't know if he gave me a medication or not, I don't remember. I started to do all of this psychological work primarily based on what was going to happen to my daughter if I didn't collaborate. So in those days, it was the same old story, that if one collaborates, one could get back her child—I had heard it from other guerrillas when their kids were given away to others, that a lot of things can happen. And I told myself that if I don't collaborate, they were going to take me a concentration camp, so it was not going to be easy (Interview EP, 11/2/2008).

Still, Ester chose not to collaborate. She boarded a truck and was struck by how young her fellow passengers seemed and that they looked like they had been utterly physically and psychologically destroyed. She knows that the truck arrived with a full load of people, but she couldn't say if everyone got off at their destination, or if something else happened to them along

the way. Once she arrived at Matires, a concentration camp in Misiones, she was repeatedly tortured. She was again transferred to another concentration camp where she remembered being tortured under a bright light, with a loud radio, and groups of men continually humiliating the prisoners. Eventually she was transferred again, this time to a prison in Chaco. At this prison, the military brought other people who might recognize Ester. Fortunately, because Ester had been pregnant before her abduction, she had not gone out much and did not have a lot of social contact with others. The military also brought a crying baby telling her that it was hers and that she could see Nora if she told them where Negro was located. Because Negro held a high position in his political organization, the military was intent on finding him. But the military was lying about the baby. The military took Ester to another concentration camp where she was tortured again—they threw water on her and then immediately electrocuted her. Eventually she was transferred to a prison. It was there she discovered that her daughter Nora was in the care of some common prisoners. The military had brought in a Paraguayan woman who had been caring for Nora the day before Ester arrived. The common prisoners communicated with Ester and verified that the baby was indeed Nora by specific physical markers and the baby bag that Ester had carried. The prisoners continued to take care of Nora. With help from the church, Ester's parents were eventually able to claim Nora from the prison. After five years, Ester was released in 1982 and was then kept under *libertad vigilada*.

A very extensive vocabulary developed to describe the events and actions in CCDs and torture sessions. To give up information under torture was described in English as “singing: (in Spanish, *cantar*). In addition, to *abrir los cantos*, which literally means to “open up the songs,” or “to open up singing,” meant giving away information. That some *compañeros* spoke under

torture while others did not is a source of some speculation among ex presos. Pedro attributed the different responses to variations in the political backgrounds of prisoners:

I believe that those who suffered the most from the impacts of imprisonment, from the uprooting, and misunderstanding were the *compañeros* who came from the left by the vagaries of politics, of ugly mistakes. I tell you and say it because there are things people want to know—the Argentine Communist Parties, they were a disaster in prison, completely broken. We resisted, like [Ely Eichenberger] told you, we staged the “battle of the panties”, and in Sierra Chica, we said we weren’t going to ‘sing the songs’. They opened up (Interview PG, 11/9/2008).

Pedro theorized that those who belonged to communist parties broke down under torture more easily than other militants. To support his theory, Pedro toward the end of this passage, references Ely’s story (the same one told by Cristina Diaz in Chapter 5) about the women prisoners’ refusal to lower their underwear during prison inspections. (Ely, who was present at this interview, was herself was once part of the “Battle of Bombachas (panties)” and a former member of the Communist Party.) Pedro further clarified what he meant by *abrir los cantos*.

We carried the news here, we put them on cellophane paper, with plastic, we made them like suppositories, and put them in our butts. After we moved, we took them out, we washed them, and we read the news they brought us. The guys realized what we were doing, so they made us open up, and we didn’t want to open up. The ones from the communist party—the leftist versions of it—they did what they were told, they didn’t resist at all; it contradicted what they said about Videla being ‘democratic,’ in this sense, about the way prisoners resisted. I believe until the end that this was something that related to your political and social past. They broke down some *compañeros*, but very few of them—I can count them on my hand (Interview PG, 11/9/2008).

Sometimes prisoners would receive visits or they would negotiate with common prisoners who would bring the letters into the prison, and then the political prisoners would attempt to return to their cells with the letters hidden. Ester once told me that she couldn’t stand the smell, even after the pieces of paper were washed.

The mention of (the dictator) Videla being non-democratic in his oppression toward his victims most likely refers to the fact that although the dictatorship was allegedly fighting a

communist threat, members of the Communist Party were actually treated more favorably than others because the Russian Communist Party had made an agreement with the dictatorship: In exchange for purchasing their grains, Argentina promised to not kill Communists. Thus, Communists were—in theory—supposed to have different conditions, and were more likely to survive. However, not all military officers applied this agreement equally and many communists were kidnapped and tortured, and also disappeared. What is significant is that Pedro believes that there is a relationship between resistance in prison and the health of a survivor after being released.

Ely describes—in much the same way that Cristina and Viviana did—what she called the “Battle of the Bombachas.”

The battle of the panties was how we resisted from October-November of 1976 until 1979. We assumed the position to not lower our panties or take off our bras for the inspections. It was an example of resistance, that...something they don't comment much on when telling history. For me, it's, I would like to call it, yes, the Battle of the Bombachas. Because we were making most of our position as women, in...inside a reactionary society, and how, Devoto, was somewhat a glass prison, the prison to show assembled situations of communist resistance. Another example is when I came to Devoto, I started to file a habeas corpus, as there was no actual case against me: Either open up a case against me or grant me freedom. Well, they rejected me, I went back to filing it again, using legal means that no one believed in at the time—and neither did I—but it was a form of resistance. So it was like how we put together the library in the prison on Saturday mornings; we put all of the books on the worktops, and the compañeras passed them as if it was Avenida Corrientes street<sup>30</sup>! (laughter) (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

Ely is speaking about two kinds of resistance. One is communal; she teamed up with her fellow prisoners to protest the daily inspections and to retain their dignity by refusing to strip for the guards. Even though—as Cristina's earlier testimony about “the war of the panties” made

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<sup>30</sup> Avenida Corrientes is a well-known avenue in Buenos Aires that stretches for several blocks and is entirely lined with bookstores. This street is what led to the Argentine capital's reputation as being one of the world's most literate cities. It is still a popular activity to browse and buy books from the many independent bookstores on this street.

clear—the prisoners were beaten as result of their protest, they were actively resisting what was happening to them. They did not simply submit and Ely wanted this side of the story told.

Although they were also tortured and subjected to various forms of cruel treatment, as victims of state terrorism they were not all passive. In addition, Ely explains that she also resisted through another means—by petitioning the legal system and with the state. Even though basic civil rights had been suspended, before the dictatorship the Argentine state had a constitution that guaranteed a right to habeas corpus. In addition, the prisoners were able to tap into international networks to file denouncements against the dictatorship by calling attention to their denial of habeas corpus. For Ely, this was a form of resistance.

Ely engaged in another type of resistance from inside the prison:

I did theatre inside. I directed the theatre inside. I was taken to the punishment cell for doing theatre. (laughter) We did theatre on Saturdays in the showers. In the showers, the showers were more or less a pretty big space. Here you had...the showers were separated by devices, here in this big space, that was where we left our towels. Here (she outlines the space with her fingers on the table) we the public sat, and in this space, with the exit from the showers, they did plays. So suppose we were like—eh—80 persons for each cell. So we did four showings, twenty, twenty, twenty, twenty. And “Elba” who was there the other day at Congress at the workshop, Elba<sup>31</sup>—I had to mount the whole security structure so that she could do theatre! (laughter) but it was important for the compañeras to know and do theatre (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

Even in a prison, the prisoners took advantage of one of the few communal moments that they had in order to stage plays. It was a way to keep themselves entertained and to raise everyone’s spirits. Using her background in theatre, Ely organized and directed the women to participate, creating a system where they could do plays, hopefully without being caught.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> María Elba Martínez is a former political prisoner who has since become a prominent human rights lawyer in Córdoba

<sup>32</sup> The showers were a dangerous space for prisoner because, as one former political prisoner explained, they were also a place where rape was a constant fear. Being too clean could also make one too attractive (Interview CP, date).

## **Education**

The former political prisoners passed their time by teaching each other about their particular fields of knowledge. For example, Sara Waitman was a physical education teacher and taught her fellow prisoners simple exercises to keep their muscles working in their tiny cells. Professors taught their subjects, and militants taught political history. Todorov argues that attending to the “life of the mind” in extreme situations, like in concentration camps during the Holocaust, is a form of moral action (1996:92-96). The ex presos were performing “ordinary virtues” in order to maintain their sense of humanity (Todorov 1996:107). However, in order to teach each other, they first had to learn how to communicate. Gladys Regalado felt particularly grateful to the common prisoners who taught them how to survive in prison—this in itself was a tremendous education. By giving them the ability communicate, the common prisoners enabled the political prisoners to teach one another and gave them a way to pass time.

**Gladys:** Well, in UP1 we learned how to talk with our hands, it was the way in which we could communicate with the common prisoners, and then get information about the *compañeros* that were in the other pavilion. I also learned Morse, to speak in Morse. I remember when they brought a batch of *compañeros* from Rio Cuarto, they put them in the cell below ours, in the same pavilion but below us. I made friends with a *compañero*, speaking in Morse and we passed the entire night speaking in Morse, and checking every so often that they weren't doing the rounds—the guards—because they would punish us.

**Rebekah:** It's not difficult to learn Morse?

**Gladys:** No, at the beginning yes, but then you get used to it, and to stay the whole night speaking in Morse it was quick, and the common prisoners here in UP1 helped us a lot. If they hadn't been there we would have totally been *incomunicado*, but they always took a risk for us... They informed us of things about the boys, and to them about us. And they took charge of carrying messages. We would write on toilet paper or whatever paper that came across us, and the boys also sent us things, really if it hadn't been for the common prisoners—I always say everywhere I go that I thank them because it was worse when the military entered UP1 “to dance” as the *compañeros* and *compañeras* said, and punished them, and well, they screamed. One day the common prisoners staged a protest so that they would stop torturing us (Interview GR, 9/3/2008).



Political prisoners may command a certain amount of sympathy because they aren't seen as criminals, or considered to have committed moral wrongs in the same way a robber or a murderer does to end up in prison. However, the political prisoners shared many stories of how they were able to communicate with other prisoners and with people outside of the prison because of the common prisoners. Since the common prisoners had more privileges and better conditions than the political prisoners, they were better able to communicate with their own family members more frequently. These family members would send messages to the relatives of the political prisoners—and they would negotiate fees amongst themselves. Still, aside from the small monetary exchanges, the common prisoners taught the political prisoners how to communicate with each other, which was key in enabling them to have contact with others.

Antonio Alcázar, who was detained in 1975 and imprisoned for four years for being a sympathizer with leftist groups, argued that he learned more about politics in prison than he did before—in fact, he became politicized after spending time with his compañeros and listening to them from his cell. This was the major change he experienced as a person before and after prison.

Well, I changed because after I got out, I had acquired a profound amount of knowledge in prison, of politics, history. That is, I began to know what I didn't know: of revolution, war, the French Revolution, ideology, Marx, that I didn't know much about the church. I studied the entire history of the Catholic Church from inside prison. I was, let's say, thinking and dedicating myself to the humanities, including having an internal orientation, a little more on my interior life, just as I had done with in exterior life with work, something I still do today. That first stage, it wasn't completely erased, because I went on working, in maintenance even though I kept having, but let's say, without being the person I was before that saw an objective like that. The technology, the advances in terms of science, or that I had changed completely and started to study other things like it was the first time, like I dedicated myself more, and I started to participate in politics, or that I started going to political meetings, and I had a lot of contact with people doing politics, something that I hadn't done before and I started to speak more about politics, of everything (Interview AA, 10/21/2008).

Because not all of those who were kidnapped had the same level of political commitment, knowledge, or even background, there was a lot of potential for prisoners to learn from each other. As mentioned more than once before, the prisoners would share their knowledge with one another as a way to pass time, to keep their minds active, and to resist the conditions in which they were placed. Antonio learned that he knew little about the world, and being shut up in a prison with those who knew a lot about history, politics, and religion ended up exposing him to more knowledge than before. The greatest irony is that while the military attempted to depoliticize militants by punishing and torturing them, in the case of Antonio, he explained that he became politicized because of what he learned in prison.

In her interview, Carmen Perez, who was imprisoned in 1978 for her activities as a Montonera and released in 1983, remarked that housewives who were imprisoned because of their husbands' labor or political activities and had no political background also became political from being around other militants. She described the types of people she met in prison:

In general they were youth, but there were a lot of older compañeras. There were a lot of wives; the wives were taken more because of their husbands than for their ideologies. A lot of wives of political prisoners were taken with their husbands, and they learned about politics in prison. Before they knew nothing, and they came out serious militants (Interview CP, 8/24/2008).

The fact that people who were tortured and imprisoned continued with their political vision by teaching others and organizing, essentially, those who were unfamiliar with political ideologies, is one of clearest signs of resistance. The military tried to imprison anyone who even thought in a way that ran counter to its own ideologies—for being an intellectual, say—and yet these intellectuals were able to share their ideas through the prison walls. These are the stories that the ex presos want to share with youth and others in society. They also direct attention to the fact that the dictatorship's labeling of freedom of thought, intellectualism, education, and certain

fields of study as subversive. When ex presos explain this aspect of the military dictatorship to students visiting the sites of former CCDs, the effect it has on students with an interest in those particular subjects is quite strong; it is only then that they realize that in an earlier era, they would have been at risk.

## **Mental Health Care**

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, who believed that cultivating meaning in one's life was crucial in surviving the concentration camps, wrote, "The prisoner who lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual gold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay" (1986:95).

Staying mentally sane or healthy was a major concern for prisoners who were regularly subjected to psychological forms of torture. Ely recalled being punished and sent to the isolation cell, but she also recalled the strategies she adopted to keep her sanity. First, Ely described how she ended up in the *celda de castigo* "punishment cell" three times.

I think that in prison I worried a lot about maintaining my mental health. Before I got out I was, for three months almost straight, in the punishment cell. They let me go down in the morning and I would go up in the afternoon. (laughter) I think it was like...my analysis, or my decision, or my vision that I didn't have, because that was the reality, that they already knew that I was going to be happy to have *libertad vigilada*. Then they did a process so that I would come out very delicate during *libertad vigilada* and be vulnerable, no? So it was like persecution. First they took me for an inspection. We had refused to lower our panties. Ehh... When I was about to finish this censure of 15 days, I was bathing and saw an inspector, let's say. She was standing in front of me and said, "Hurry! Finish this bath quickly." So I covered and said to her, "Well, then go." I confronted her that I would bathe quickly but she had to go. With pride I worked out an agreement. So she said to me, "Look, then you get a suspension." "Well, suspend me but I bathe when..." I had swallow 15 days for not lowering my panties, I got angry for bathing in front of this crazy lady. Well, then I had a month. Then I went down. That day, the mail arrived, and I asked for letters. They accused me of giving the mail girl a bad look. Trung! Upstairs. I returned. When I got back, we went to the patio. The patio,

the patio break. And when we were going up the stairs, they said, “Eichenberger. Stay in the cell.” “Why” I asked. “Because you were talking.” “I wasn’t talking.” “Yes, you are speaking.” Yup, once again. And this time I had a vision problem (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

When she was forced back into the cell the third time, Ely mentioned that she had vision problems. While it was difficult to explain, Ely briefly mentioned that being held under water caused her capillaries to burst, affecting her eyesight.

Because I had very thick near-sightedness. So in... this form...generally can, they can break the capillary veins. They produce, eh, like dunkings. It can cut off your breathing, I had already disassociated myself from my body. A... how do you say... It’s... no, no, how was it? A coping mechanism to get out. One time, I was on the fifth, and they had come to look for me to do a study and they wouldn’t let me leave. Therefore it’s a resource of...the last suspension that I had, I came out halfway in, when I got out, I was closed in. It’s kind of complicated to tell this story! (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

In order to cope with her time in the punishment cell, Ely found ways to keep her mind occupied as a way of preserving her sense of mental health.

On the fourth day, you start to ask “Why me?” And when you’ve entered the “why me?” it’s a failure—you go to shit. You’re fucked. So the question was, organize your little head so you don’t end up the same. Because when you enter in...when you get into a depression, and... you tread on...you end up here in depression, you can go to shit, you don’t have anyone to sustain you, there is no compañera who can say to you “Take my hand!” There is no compañera you is going to say to you “Come on, you have to be brave. You have to be brave.” Ha! (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

What made the punishment cell challenging and different from being in other cells is that one had no communication with others. At least in the cells, even if they could not see each other, they could at least hear each other. They could extend a hand, metaphorically, to another prisoner who was struggling. A sense of community was important in helping each other survive prison.

To better understand the kind of mental work that Ely engaged in while she was in the punishment cell, I asked her what specifically she thought about or how she “organized her head.”

I, in all of those three months that I was in the cell, I had it organized like this: in the morning, when I woke up, they woke me up at 6:30 (she taps her finger on the table), they took the mattress away from me. They didn't leave you with the mattress; they took it. So, while—I—there was a mattress, I would take advantage when the *bicha*<sup>33</sup> (snake), the *pistola* (gun) was doing other things, I would do exercises. The *maté cocido*<sup>34</sup> would come. (pause) I would drink the mate cocido. (pause). After, (pause), I would look (pause), I would do mental exercises in math. (pause) For example, let's see, the surface of that, eh...of that... of that wall. The surface of the window, the measurement, and I would do mental calculations. The surface of the concrete bed—the bed had all of those holes [in the bedspring], so then, when I focused on a hole, I would multiply how many, how much space was metal, how much was space—well, all of the mental calculations to work the, the, logical thought, no? (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

Through these activities, Ely prevented herself from falling into the existential crisis of “why me?”

One common theme that emerged from testimonies of Holocaust survivors was the importance of keeping up one's hygiene and appearance—which provided many with a sense of dignity or something intangible, mentally or emotionally, that helped them live through the indignities of concentration camps. Gladys Regalado was known for her preening, immaculate appearance, and femininity, and shared how she maintained her tweezing and waxing.

Yes, there in the penitentiary here in Córdoba I was always doing myself up, being very coquettish, all of the girls made fun of me because I worried about my hair. I straighten my hair without rollers, without anything, because we didn't have anything. I tweezed with the top of the milk can Nido, there had been a *compañera* who had been given Nido milk and with the top it was our mirror. So the girls always made fun of me because they said, “She always, although she's in prison, she tweezes, and straightens her hair.” Well, those were the things the girls were left remembering because when one is in there all locked up who is going to be interested in being pretty or ugly if no one is going to see you? But, well, it made me feel good. And later I remember that they called me Bazooka because when I got angry, my face would inflame and I'd get red, so they gave me the name of the Bazooka gum (Interview GR, 9/3/2008).

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<sup>33</sup> Ely is using slang to describe the women prison guards.

<sup>34</sup> Normally Argentines drink loose leaf tea (*mate*) in a gourd, which is also called a *mate*. *Mate cocido* is when the tea comes in a tea bag, and is not considered to be of the same quality as how *mate* is traditionally served.

Gladys' comments reveal both the sense of humor with which prisoners interacted and the care she put into caring for herself even when she had very little with which to improve her appearance. The resourcefulness of the prisoners exemplified a sense of resistance toward the conditions in which they were placed.

### **The Particular Memories of Former Political Prisoners**

The dominant memory passed on has focused on torture, isolation, and suffering. These alternative memories, the ones of the ex presos, are situated amidst torture and suffering, but they provide another perspective that does not portray the political prisoners as passive, weak victims, but as resisters who in spite of efforts designed to prevent them from communicating with one another found solidarity within their prison cells.

The ex presos, rather than reinforcing their victimhood, instead remember themselves as activists in prison, as agents. If there is a healing process in place, then the ex presos, I would argue are surviving because of their knowledge that they still remained agents of their own making in prison. Even as they were in solitary confinement and tortured, they refused to give up information and the names of others—they were choosing to be militants. By remembering themselves as agents, they move away from the image of victimhood. When speaking in the memorialized spaces to others about the past, the ex presos do not talk about torture methods used on them. They share stories of how they reached out to others, even under the most cruel and impossible circumstances. They learned how to communicate with each other with sign language when they were prohibited from talking. They collectively refused to enter their cells

when conditions became unbearable. They remained silent when their torturers electrocuted them.

One of the primary reasons I believe that ex presos participate in trials, memorializing efforts, and archival work is because they seek recognition. This recognition validates them as individuals who have suffered and who were a part of Argentine history. For Juan Carlos the most powerful event that redeemed him or helped him after he was freed from prison was being recognized for his identity as a former political militant who opposed the dictatorship:

I remember having gone to visit the Spanish ambassador who received us immediately—a group of compañeros—because they had always denied me a visa. I had a visa for various countries. My family did the paperwork but the authorities never let me leave, for one pretext, for another, they were going to study the case. Since it didn't make sense, for whatever reason they never let me leave the country. We went to see and the ambassador said to us, “We lived through Franco, we acknowledge your fight.” We were, I think, three or four. “I thank you for having visited me, but it's our opportunity to celebrate the fact that we have a lot of exiles from many countries, but we also suffered under Franco, a terrible dictatorship, you all have to walk tall in front, keep going on caring for us.” He gave us a series of very, very useful advice. And then I started to cry because he took my hand and embraced me and said, “I want that my children become like you, but I have the kinds of kids that are in other things. Because what happened is that we had already a democracy over there being a part of Europe that it was too small for us. There are other countries, so they went, and they know other things, that like in this country, that I know well and that I feel like an Argentine, and I see the marvelous youth, and because General Perón was once there, it makes me...” And then halfway the two of us were crying (Interview JA, 2/25/2009).

When I asked Juan Carlos how he felt after General Menéndez was sentenced in 2008, he fell into a depression because he had hoped people would finally recognize the mistakes the military made, but felt that the trial had not generated the amount of public attention he had expected.

Giving former political prisoners the opportunity to direct Spaces of Memory enables them to teach others about what happened in Argentina, and share the kind of memories that differ from the stories of torture that are told in *Nunca Más*. But Juan Carlos also articulated what the former political prisoners also want—they want to be remembered not as weaklings but

remembered for their political resistance, identity, and solidarity. They want others to recognize that they were held under inhumane conditions, which gives them the right to not only speak but also to demand reparations, even though they refuse to be defined by the traditional image of what a deserving victim must be. In other words, instead of having to portray themselves as apolitical, innocent, naïve youth during the '70s and '80s who were caught up by the dictatorship's overzealous war methods, they instead explain that they were challenging the dictatorship and were seen to be threatening because social movements have the power to exert influence over the country's direction—be it economical or cultural. They are asking for a space that allows them to emphasize solidarity and resistance over victimization.



## Chapter 7

### Searching for Healing? Or Remaining a Militant?

“[C]linicians may subordinate social needs of clients to the ethical call to bear witness, neglect to acknowledge the nuanced moral complexity of political violence, and lose sight of the understanding that traumatic memories are politically and culturally mediated. As a result, an ideology may crystallize that casts clients as innocent victims, paradoxically denying a sense of their full moral and psychological agency rather than restoring it.”

- Kelly McKinney

In *Radical Hope* (2006), philosopher Jonathan Lear’s imagines the psychological change that the Crow Indians underwent to grapple with their culture’s end and to survive despite the imminent destruction of their way of life by American colonization and oppression. The ex presos offer us a similar example of how victims of political violence, who experienced the collapse of their world around them, reoriented themselves in service of their political dreams. Lear explores how the Crow Nation—particularly the last chief, Plenty Coups—faced the end of its civilization. The American government’s restriction of the Crow to a small reservation effectively ended their way of life. Unable to span large spaces and claim land, the Crow could no longer war with other tribes and “plant coup-sticks.” Planting coup-sticks in their enemy’s land was how the Crow demonstrated boundaries, power, and threats—this ritual also enabled young men to express courage and their culture.

In fact, every aspect of Crow cultural life revolved around planting coup-sticks. Women would help prepare foods for men before they went to war, because the meaning and purpose behind their tasks all connected to planting coup-sticks. Losing their traditional way of life meant that the Crow lost the concepts through which to understand their lives and identities. Thus, Lear sought to understand how the Crow psychologically readjusted to the end of their civilization and

continued to live: “The suggestion I want to explore is that if our way of life collapsed, things would cease to happen. What could this mean? And there is another aspect to our question that I want to explore: What would it be to be a witness to this breakdown?” (2006:6). Lear poses an existential thought experiment, asking how one faces utter destruction and continues to live even when all sense of reality, or the concepts by which to understand that reality, are lost.

Yet, Lear’s project is not simply a narration of how the Crow faced utter destruction; it is also about how the Crow had lost the context in which they had until then performed virtuous acts, and therefore had to, quite literally, start all over again and organize new principles by which to live: “The issue is that the Crow have lost the concepts with which they would construct a narrative. This is a *real loss*, not just one that is described from a certain point of view. It is the *real loss of a point of view*” (2006:32) [italics Lear’s]. Lear is moved by the radical hope of the chief and his people even after their civilization ends. This is not about optimism, because then the hope could no longer be considered courageous. This is about imagination: “What makes this hope radical is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it. What would it be for such hope to be justified?” (2006:103). Plenty Coups envisions a future for his people. The Crow now live partially integrated in U.S. culture, but still retain their own cultural history and modes of thinking—though with a new conceptual framework.

Lear’s concept of radical hope describes the resistance, or constant reorientation toward the future, that I witnessed with the ex presos. While the situations are not equal—the U.S. government’s destruction of Crow culture was absolute and continues in the present—there is a parallel in the way both sets of individuals watched the world around them shift radically. The

ex presos faced a similar situation—they were part of large-scale social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, complete with its own culture, practices, ideologies, and morals. They killed their compañeros, dismantled their organizations—and made it illegal to organize—and attempted to destroy them with torture and imprisonment. Ex presos had to psychologically transform themselves in order to survive, not only in prison but also in the changed world they encountered after their release. Even when they were powerless, people can resist through small but significant acts and find ways to survive (Scott 1985).

Like Plenty Coups, the ex presos have had to adapt. The AEPPC works with the government, a relationship that would have been unthinkable in the 1960 and 1970s. Like the Crow who worked with the U.S. government to support their new way of life, the ex presos have learned that in order to survive, they must work with those in power. Although the ex presos functioned as a group in 2003, they changed their status to work with the government in 2007 so that they could obtain government subsidies, which in turn allowed them to rent an office space, pay for bus rides to lobby senators in Buenos Aires, and receive funding for their projects. Plenty Coups was criticized for working with the government, but his tribe lived on—differently, yes—because they accepted that assistance.

If the primary loss suffered by ex presos is the loss of their social movement, a dream, and their compañeros, then their expression of radical hope is in the revival and continuation of their militant identities, and true justice will, the ex presos say, be achieved only by organizing the *pueblo* (the common people) for social change. Their continued activism against neoliberalism is an expression of radical hope because despite all that the ex presos have gone through and the challenges they face, they are still committed to their own survival and the survival of their social movements, their Marxist-influenced values, and their dreams for a more

equal future. Perhaps in this way, the ability of ex presos to effect change is an integral part of healing processes. By remembering and continuing to be militants, and not simply sufferers, they are able to heal.

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In their oral history archive interviews, most of the ex presos claimed that they did not suffer any after-effects from torture or from the harsh conditions of prison life. Yet, these same ex presos were also participating in a campaign to lobby for more economic reparations from the government in compensation for their physical and psychological health problems caused from torture. But if ex presos do not suffer from torture and imprisonment, then why lobby for reparations? Was their self-identification as torture victims a strategy to win reparations? Perhaps they were fighting for other compañeros and not for themselves?

This contradiction—stating for a historical record that there is no continued suffering while simultaneously lobbying state senators for reparations to compensate for that suffering—presented a challenge for me. How could I ever hope to understand what the long-term effects of state terrorism were if, when it suited them, the ex presos said that they were still feeling the effects of torture and prison conditions—and then, when they felt they were speaking for posterity, they made statements stating the exact opposite?

I am not a clinician, so the best way I knew to tell that whether the ex presos were indeed suffering from long-term after-effects of torture and imprisonment was by listening to them. From what they told me, in the countless informal conversations I had with ex presos, and in some of the oral history archive interviews—mostly with women—the depth of their continued suffering was quite apparent. In these conversations, ex presos would unexpectedly speak about

a memory of what happened to them when they were imprisoned, or how the torture they underwent while in prison continued to affect them.

For instance, at the trial against former Army General Benjamin Luciano Menéndez in Córdoba, I had lunch with a couple of ex presos during a session break. At one point in the meal, in the course of an otherwise ordinary conversation, “Cynthia” told me that she has difficulty having sex with her husband because of the multiple rapes she endured as a prisoner. I also often heard ex presos talk collectively about their time in prison, usually after meetings at cafes or at rallies. One Saturday night after a meeting, at a corner café, the conversation turned from local current events to a report of one ex preso, who was not part of the AEPPC. She was suffering from mental health problems and had taken to sleeping in a closet. Several compañeros nodded along. Some spoke about their own prison cells, which were dark cramped, and windowless—a lot like closets, in fact. Some spoke about having a small hole or a tiny window in their cells. The lucky ones could see treetops—this view of some foliage was an escape. Comparing notes, they would indulge in black humor and made light of their harrowing living conditions.<sup>35</sup>

And then they would simply move onto another topic. Speaking about the past came and went when the ex presos were together—the topic would arise when something or someone would remind them of their time in prison. This happened frequently, particularly during social gatherings—during the third meal of the day over maté and pastries, or at weekend barbecues. Stories seeped out in the most unexpected situations, and they revealed to me how enduring the effects were and how they emerged unevenly at different times.

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<sup>35</sup> If the way in which they behaved in meetings left me with any doubt that they were suffering from long-term effects of torture and imprisonment, I also could rely on my own emotional state. I simply *felt* that they were traumatized; after the weekly meetings, which lasted hours, I would return home from meetings and feel exhausted, depressed, and heavy—as if I had emotionally absorbed their feelings. One ex presa, who doesn’t belong to the AEPPC, told me that their energy was affecting me.

The ex presos believe they suffered from, and continue to suffer from, the effects of state terrorism, even though most did not speak about these long-lasting impacts in their recorded interviews. State terrorism describes the whole bureaucratic system that the military imposed on its victims, including disappearances, torture, threats, illegal imprisonment, monitoring, discrimination, and destruction of social and labor movements. Ex presos believe they are suffering not just from torture and imprisonment but also decades of social marginalization, which has led to their poor health conditions today. The need for ex presos to express their suffering is an important component of gaining reparations because their narratives determine how states respond (Slyomovics 2009:277, 283). When my recorder wasn't running, I spoke with ex presos about trauma, poor health, depression, amnesia, paranoia, anger, and economic struggles. Because of these personal conversations, I knew the apparent contradiction between what they told their elected officials and what they said in their archived interviews was not simply a matter of their playing victims at some times and posturing as unbowed militants at others. Nor was this a case of an anthropologist not being close enough to her research participants. My fieldwork observations convinced me that ex presos did indeed suffer, but that they did not want to be defined by torture; they want their full humanity recognized.

Ex presos claim to be both militants and victims of state terrorism. However, they have received public attention only on the basis of their victimhood. For this reason, I listened to the ex presos in multiple settings to hear how they spoke about what happened to them, as well as to understand their reason for deserving reparations. Slyomovics urges anthropologists to “listen both inside and outside the courts, considering reparations as a matter of law, as a social movement, and as an extension of a political project” (2009:8). Thus, the campaign for reparations is not merely a legal or transitional justice matter, but one that extends from the ex

presos' ideas of what constitutes rights and a desire to be recognized by the state as wronged citizens. The ex presos were not passive victims, but militants who fought for political change. However, ex presos believe that no citizen should be subjected to human rights abuses such as torture, extrajudicial killings, and denial of legal rights. In this chapter, I argue that this contradiction of being both affected and not affected by torture and degrading prison conditions is a reflection of the ex presos' commitment to their militant identities. By presenting themselves as—relatively—unscathed, as survivors, they also assert their resilience as ideologically committed resisters whom the military tried and failed to break down with its torture methods. They survived prison through their constant reassertion of their militant ideals and sense of purpose and they recovered their lives without psychological or financial assistance upon their release through their continued commitment to activism in social, political, and labor issues.

The desire on the part of ex presos to not be associated with torture may be a reaction to the fact that most interest in survivors of mass violence has revolved around torture—from the truth commissions who solicit testimonies of torture to psychologists interested in documenting PTSD and helping them as healthcare providers. This is no accident, particularly considering the fact that the international human rights movement initially focused on the denouncement of torture (see Moyn 2010:147) as the primary intervention. Thus, not only did ex presos have to work to bring attention beyond torture violations, but they also had to fight the notion that the torture that happened to them could not be healed and that they were more than just torture victims. In other words, giving testimony to psychologists about their torture did not necessarily address the most pressing concerns held by the victims. In her study of clinical encounters between therapists and torture victims, Kelly McKinney found that therapists who were so intent

on soliciting the “trauma story” were disappointed in the lack of emotionally invested testimonies on the part of their clients who were more interested in speaking about their practical social needs (2007:280). One therapist interviewed by McKinney said she was unable to fulfill her duty in bearing witness because clients sought her out for more instrumental ends, such as gaining asylum (2007:280). Thus, victims of torture are expected to focus on trauma rather than mundane concerns, or are seen simply as innocent victims and not as political actors. Similarly, ex presos, when they are not seen as terrorists or traitors, are identified as victims. They are one or the other, but not both.

In private AEPPC meetings (I was the only non-ex preso present), ex presos frequently spoke about how they were all suffering. Emotions at these meetings—even during conversations about mundane topics, like an upcoming event—could often run high, suggesting that many ex presos were suffering from PTSD. Many certainly displayed some of PTSD’s classic symptoms, such as aggression and paranoia. At the first few meetings I attended, several members expressed their embarrassment for “behaving badly” in front of an American anthropologist, but as I quickly became a constant fixture and *compañera*, there was no holding back. I witnessed a lot of heated arguments: papers were slammed on tables and people stormed out of meeting rooms. Most of the time, I witnessed a lot of humor and kindness—but it was not uncommon for a member to break down in front of everyone and cry, and for another member to say, by way of consolation or explanation, “We all need psychologists.” Or for another to accuse her fellow *compañeros*, “I seek therapy, but none of you do.”<sup>36</sup> (Among the group of about 40 regular attending members, only about four *compañeros* sought some form of therapy.)

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<sup>36</sup> Fieldnotes, 8/9/2008.



Despite all the drama, the AEPPC reached all of its decisions based on consensus and, when necessary, by democratic vote. The members were all passionate and committed to following through on the group's various projects. And just as the ex presos spoke about their time in camps and in prison, they also shared stories of protests, of supporting fellow prisoners while incarcerated, despite all the rules and prohibitions imposed upon them by the military (e.g. no touching, no talking to each other). They spoke about organizing themselves in prison despite—or because of—all that they were being subjected to. In meetings, rallies, conferences, and in public presentations, the ex presos spoke about the significance of social movements and how they remain committed to building, or rebuilding, them in their communities today. Having spent a full year with ex presos, seeing them on a daily basis, I realized that, for the ex presos, their ability stay sane through imprisonment and torture, and their capacity to rebuild their lives afterward, had everything to do with their ability to maintain their political identities throughout it all.

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### **The Interrogation and Torture Methods**

While this research does not discuss torture extensively—the ex presos are not interested in circulating stories about torture methods—understanding how the military treated them helps explain why they are fighting to receive economic compensation.

Immediately upon kidnapping, task groups beat and blindfolded their victims. This sensory deprivation helped to disorient the prisoners. Task groups often brought their captives to “intake” centers where they were interrogated and severely beaten. Using metal, rubber and wooden weapons, the military would beat prisoners sometimes leaving them with partial disabilities or even worse injuries, including broken bones, ruptured kidneys, and, in the case of

some pregnant female prisoners, spontaneous miscarriage (IACHR 1980). Another tool used during these interrogation sessions was the *picana*, a cattle prod that delivers a high-voltage electric shock. Interrogators applied the *picana* to their victims' genitals and breasts, to their temples, hands, legs, and feet, as well as to sensitive areas such as the gums and eyes. To intensify the electricity, the military would also tie prisoners to metal bed frames and pour water over their bodies, which would result in the prisoner's flesh burn at every point of contact with the metal. The military called this a *parilla*, which is the Spanish word for a grill on which cuts of meat are prepared. Military officers literally roasted their prisoners' flesh, and this torture method came with a heavy dose of cultural imagery: the *picana* is what Argentina's cowboys, or *gauchos*, use to herd cattle, and even just the word "parrilla," evokes the quintessentially Argentine Sunday ritual of hosting a barbeque for family and friends. In addition to electric torture, many survivors also experienced the *submarino* (submarine), which is known in the U.S. as waterboarding, a method of torture in which the victim's head is repeatedly pushed under water for long periods of time. The submarine was intended to simulate the feeling of drowning. For many victims, the worst part was the putrid water, or being able to taste the previous victims in the water. When they were not being tortured, prisoners were kept in inhumane conditions, starved, denied permission to go to the bathroom, and were subjected to sexual abuse. Psychological forms of torture were used throughout their imprisonment: in some cases, a prisoner's children would be kidnapped and forced to join the torture sessions in order to inflict emotional pain onto their parents.

The dictatorship's prisoners were not only tortured in the secret concentration camps; even when they were placed in common prisons, the military treated the political prisoners more harshly than the common prisoners. Guards regularly punished the political prisoners and

revoked standard rights without much rationale or logic in order to continually frustrate, confuse, and threaten prisoners. For example, guards would place prisoners into solitary confinement for speaking when they had, in fact, been silent. Political prisoners were frequently removed from their prison cells for interrogation sessions, and at the beginning of the dictatorship, some were taken out and executed. Placed in small, individual cells without windows, prisoners were unable to exercise. Still, the ex presos recall small acts of resistance, which even took place while they were being tortured or held in secret locations. The few ex presos who did mention the torture they endured also spoke about how they or others found ways to protest. These memories attest to their militant identities—as always actively resisting their oppressors even while they were powerless to affect the overall situation. I include some excerpts from their interviews on their own experiences in the camps and prisons.

### Carmen

Carmen was 53 years old at the time I interviewed her in her home for the oral history archive. At the time, she was still a member of the AEPPC, (although later the AEPPC voted to expel her from the group), and we had spent many days together. Carmen and I were both on the AEPPC's editorial committee for *Eslabones*, and we often saw each other at meetings, social gatherings, and at rallies. Carmen is known for her ability to remember accurately and for her expansive knowledge of Argentine history. Carmen is a widow; her husband, with whom she had a son, died from aftereffects of torture.

The military detained Carmen when she was 23 years old on April 13, 1978 for being a Montonera (the leftist, radical branch of the Peronist Party). Immediately after her abduction, the

military took her to La Perla and the small compound near it, where she was held for three months, until July 18. Carmen recalled how she was tortured:

Carmen: After they torture you with electric current, they never take you to shower immediately. Unless they had applied the current to you just once. But if they gave you quite a lot of electric current, no. Because with water—the electric currents remain in the body for several days.

Rebekah: You mean the picana?

Carmen: Right, the picana is the electric current, that current stays with you, as if you touch a half-exposed cable when you're fixing things at home. It gives you that shock. You can't get wet, or, I mean, you have to wait at least a day or two. When you receive too much electricity you have to spend more time not getting wet. I guess that I was there [in La Perla] for more than a week. They only tortured me the first day with the picana, that is—they did it to my body, stomach, mouth. And after, they didn't do it again. The next day I was in a bad shape because of the punches I took to the kidneys, on my back, but I don't even know if I had bruises, I never saw them. I had a lot of infections, in the ears, only because they had definitely submerged me in a dirty bin<sup>37</sup>. Also because of the lack of hygiene, you couldn't clean yourself. Then I lost hearing in my right ear. But later they took me to be interrogated to confirm something that somebody else said, but I didn't know him. I mean, I didn't meet people during that period of time (Interview CP, 8/24/2008).

Carmen described a very common pattern of how captives were treated: beatings, electrocution, and submarino. In addition, Carmen commented on the unsanitary conditions, which produced several different types of infections—mostly of the eyes, ears, and of any open wounds or sores. Torture took place in the context of interrogation sessions, and anyone who mentioned another person's name placed the named person at risk. Some prisoners shouted out random names just to stop the torture. Someone had mentioned Carmen's name under torture, and she was subjected to additional interrogation as a result, because the military believed that Carmen had more information than she had divulged in her first interrogation session.

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<sup>37</sup> Before La Perla was converted into a concentration camp, it served as a military training ground, and near the old stables, was a large trough that horses used to drink out of. During the dictatorship, that trough was used to do the submarino. This water was so putrid that some survivors remember former Army General Menéndez ordering subordinates to add perfume to the water before he arrived to mask the smell. The water itself, however, was never changed.

Carmen’s last remark—that she didn’t know the person who named her and couldn’t confirm what he had revealed—is also very typical of what I heard from ex presos who were involved in social movements. They intentionally used *noms de guerre*, or pseudonyms, and they minimized contact with others to prevent naming each other under torture. That Carmen was involved in a political militant organization and remained silent during the interrogation sessions (even though her silence brought on more torture) is a clear sign of the depth of her commitment to the cause. After being transferred through several CCDs, Carmen was released on December 24, 1982.

### Norma

Norma and I became close after attending a pro-government rally in Buenos Aires on July 15, 2008. While waiting for a bus to take us back to Córdoba, Norma asked about my family and childhood, and we discovered that we had a lot to talk about. Her estrangement and divorce from her abusive husband was similar to my parent’s divorce, and this topic became an ongoing conversation for several months. At the time I interviewed Norma, she was 56 years old and had never given her testimony before. We conducted the interview in the patio of the office of Familiares, during her break from working on the census.

The child of a taxi driver and a nurse, Norma<sup>38</sup> came from a solidly middle-class family. She started medical school in 1972, and, after attending various rallies for several different causes and political groups, Norma became politically active. She joined PRT around 1973. The military abducted Norma and her then husband “Greg” in 1975 while they were living underground. Before taking them to a CCD, the *patota* (“gang”) beat them for a few hours,

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<sup>38</sup> Norma was imprisoned for five years for being a member of the *Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores*.

blindfolded them, and then took them to the center of police intelligence, “D2,” in the center of the city of Córdoba:

Well, they take us to D2. And, well, there the situation was crazy: the screams, the punches, I think they hit me for two days. They did the submarine on me. What I chose to do the whole time I was there was *not* ask to go to the bathroom. That is, all of my needs, I did it all on top of it all, because... (pause) I was totally dirty. Then they take me at one point, they presented me to one of the heads of security and undressed me. I do not remember if they stripped me naked or if I stripped myself, I don't remember. And I was so dirty and I smelled so awful, the boss says: "Take this grimy skinny one, she smells bad." Then I said to myself, "Great." I was very happy that this had happened (Interview NP, 10/30/2008).

Norma's strategy was itself a form of resistance; by making herself revolting, she managed to avoid being further interrogated or sexually assaulted by the commanding officer.

Norma continued:

Well, they hit him [Greg], a lot, but I could no longer distinguish who was being beaten, because one could only feel the sounds and the permanent cries. I know that they also took me at one point, they took me to the office. I went up the stairs to the doctor's office so that the doctor could determine whether or not I could withstand more torture. He said, "Yes, she can, she still has—How do you say?—She can stay in these conditions." So they didn't take me down anymore, after a day or it may have been, I don't know if it was the 18th, I don't know what day it must have been. Charlie Moore was one of them supposedly. He had belonged to the revolutionary army and became a collaborator and an active torturer; he took me to the bathroom, and he removed my blindfold, and told me not to look at him. And he said to me that in the end I was stupid who was of—a fool who was the girlfriend of an asshole because he had photos of Che Guevara, in the apartment. I screamed, but well... He was a monster. I remember Charlie Moore, that he was a monster, a crazy person. Later when I lowered my blindfold, I remember that I was still out there in the patio. I don't know what part of the patio; I have to figure it out (Interview NP, 10/30/2008).

Some physicians collaborated with the military by offering medical opinions on how much torture a person could withstand and, when necessary, treating victims—but only to the point at their being healthy enough to be tortured again. With Norma, the doctor assessed that she could not withstand more torture and said that she should stay in the condition that she was in before

being tortured again. In accordance with the doctor's recommendation, it was not until a few days later that Norma was tortured again by Carlos Raimundo "Charlie" Moore<sup>39</sup>.

Norma's detainment coincided with another major event in Córdoba. She recalled seeing people she knew at D2 who had been caught attending the funeral or marches in memory of the well-known Pujadas family. On August 15, 1975, five members of a prominent family of Spanish immigrants were killed by the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance in Córdoba. The only survivors were two young children and they were forced to escape to Spain. The patriarch was a well-known physician and his children were labor leaders and activists. These killings were considered one of the worst tragedies to happen in Córdoba in the 1970s. On August 16, one day after the Pujadas Family massacre, Norma and Greg were taken to D2.

And at a certain moment, I think Pujadas, Pujadas I think had happened on August 19.<sup>40</sup> It happened then, I don't remember when, because you could tell that many people had been taken into custody. With the whole Pujadas matter, the place was full of people, at that time, and that's why I remember this. And I also remember a compañera who, when they beat her—later I found out who she was, Monica Sotti—who afterward was together with me in jail, but is now quite ill, damaged, because she had a problem, or meningitis. So she was left with the consequences. Very intelligent, physical education teacher. When she was being beaten, she would be reciting, shouting and singing the song of a *cuarteto*<sup>41</sup>. This always stayed with me, that she was reciting it like this, "This death is not on me, the one who loads is the one who killed." She would be singing, and they would be beating her, but savagely. After August 20, we were in the patio, when there was an attempted takeover to free some of the leaders who were there. I think Osatiffi

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<sup>39</sup> Charlie Moore had been a militant in ERP, was later detained on November 1974 and remained a prisoner until 1980. During his time as prisoner, he became a collaborator with his captors. Upon his release, he lived in exile in London.

<sup>40</sup> Norma's incorrectly recalls the date when the Pujadas family was killed; it had happened the day before she arrived at D2. However, she had been in D2 for several days and knew she was detained around the time of the Pujadas massacre.

<sup>41</sup> Córdobaes and Córdobaesas are known for their love of fernet (a potent alcoholic drink usually mixed with coca-cola), their tendency to call people by nicknames, their lyrical accents, and their appreciation for *cuarteto*. *Cuarteto* is a type of folk music that originated in Córdoba, and is rooted in the music of Italian and Spanish dance ensembles. Originally, *cuarteto* was played by four-piece bands (violin, piano, accordion, and bass), which gave the music its name. The music is fast-paced and upbeat, and is still today associated with dancing and the working class of Córdoba Province.

was there, who was a Peronist Montonero. So they took the chance—that went in like hell, because we were all lying on the patio, the bullets whistling on all sides, with our eyes covered. There was also Marta Baronetto who I think was detained at Pujadas’ funeral. In response to the Pujadas, there are marches, orders and counter orders: "Let's kill them all" and other orders that said: "No, we got to send them to jail." So the position that won was the position of taking us to jail, and then we boarded a bus, that went up through the Santa Catalina Passage, because I remember the issue with the stones<sup>42</sup>. We were still blindfolded when they pull us into the truck, they took off our blindfolds and we saw the disaster that we had or the state we were all in, a disaster. A lot of beaten-up people. There was a compañera who had given birth to a baby who I remember was bruised in the face, everywhere. And the compañero as well, that’s what I remember of that situation, there were many of us and they took us all to the penitentiary (Interview NP, 10/30/2008).

Despite all of the torture happening around her at D2, Norma remembered her fellow prisoner, Monica Sotti, singing in defiance of her torturers. Just as Norma refused to ask to go to the bathroom, this woman chose to sing while she was being beaten, even if it elicited more anger and vehemence on the part of her torturers. The lyrics Monica sang accused her torturers of being responsible for killing prisoners under torture, rather than blaming the captives for “deserving” the violence. While Norma said that Monica is currently suffering from health problems that can be traced back to her time in prison, the memory that stayed with Norma was Monica’s resistance.

Norma also recalled a group of militants attempting to break someone by the name Osatiffi out of prison, and most likely Marta Baronetto who was a notable Montonera. This confrontation meant that all of the prisoners were caught in the cross-fire—an even more frightening situation considering the fact that they were all blindfolded. As a result of this guerrilla attack, the military subjected their prisoners to severe punishments and constant surveillance. When the prisoners were transferred, their blindfolds were taken off, and Norma

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<sup>42</sup> The Santa Catalina passageway is paved with cobblestones, and prisoners knew where they were located in Córdoba city even when they were blindfolded because of the bumpy ride and feeling the uneven ground underneath their feet.



was able to see—not just feel—the condition everyone was in, she saw them all bruised, bloodied and filthy. Even pregnant women were subject to the same treatment, beatings and electrocution included.<sup>43</sup>

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Ex presos may have engaged in various forms of resistance while they were tortured in the 1970s and 1980s, but thirty years later, they still suffer from long-term physical and psychological effects. Not naming any other compañeros, refusing to collaborate, and generally withstanding the torture sessions meant prolonged exposure to physical abuse, which has ended up affecting many ex presos as they aged. Ex preso Juan Carlos Alvarez<sup>44</sup> had his head beaten repeatedly—torturers would clap down on both his ears simultaneously in a procedure known as the “telephone.” Since his time in prison, Juan Carlos lost hearing in one ear, and experiences a constant buzzing sound. He also experiences migraines and nausea, the latter symptom a result of the impaired balance caused by having an uneven sense of hearing. I learned about this in one of my first interactions with Juan Carlos. When I first moved to Córdoba, I suffered from earaches caused by allergies, but at the time, the ex presos were telling me that an ear infection was going around. When I told Juan Carlos that I had an ear problem, he told me that he too suffered from ear problems. When I asked him if he also had the same ear infection as I did, he shook his head and then mimed hitting the sides of his head. I immediately knew that he was speaking of torture. Every so often Juan Carlos must stay at home because of headaches caused from the buzzing, imbalance, and dizziness. Though many older people experience hearing loss, survivors

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<sup>43</sup> Those who gave birth in CCDs were handcuffed and tied down to the bed and forced to deliver in front of military officers.

<sup>44</sup> Juan Carlos was imprisoned for eight and a half years for being a Montonero.

of torture like Juan Carlos experience a more difficult aging process because of their earlier injuries.

For others, the consequences were even more severe. Maria Carmen “Chicha” Aranguren de Schroeder’s<sup>45</sup> late husband, Carlos Enrique Schroeder, was detained in La Perla. Chicha’s husband was an activist in the Peronist Youth organization through his university’s student council. In 1971, the military government detained him twice, but he was eventually released. At the time of the military coup in 1976, Carlos was working for Córdoba’s municipal government. In November of that year, he was fired, and the military went looking for him at his home. He was abducted and disappeared to La Perla, where he remained until May 1977. This was a particularly long period of time to be kept at La Perla; at that early stage of the dictatorial rule, most prisoners were either executed within weeks of their arrival or were transferred to other prisons. Chicha met Carlos after his release from La Perla. By then, Carlos had cut off all of his political ties.

Around the beginning of the 1990s, Carlos began to suffer from memory loss, and his condition continued to deteriorate until he lost all mobility, eventually degenerating into a vegetative state. Chicha explained that the doctors attributed his brain damage to the multiple blows he took to the head when he was detained at La Perla. Before his death in 2004, he was bedridden for ten years; he spent one of those years in the hospital. Up until his neurological deterioration, Carlos had worked jobs en negro because his certificate of good conduct was never approved after his release. Chicha worked three jobs—her main employment was teaching disabled children—in order to support her husband’s medical needs and to provide for their three

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<sup>45</sup> Chicha is the only member of the Association who was never imprisoned; her inclusion in the organization is based on her solidarity with former political prisoners, in particular around health issues.

children. Since there was no government assistance to help people like Carlos, Chicha had to take care of him—which meant she had to quit her three jobs, and found a more flexible (albeit menial) job cleaning offices three times a day, in the morning, three hours in the afternoon, and during the siesta hour. Between these times, she cared for her husband.

In addition to the lack of government support, Chicha also lacked social support because of the broader societal distrust of the ex presos. But while most of Chicha’s friends and neighbors shunned her, believing that her husband must have done something to deserve his detention, there were a few exceptions. Chicha’s sister-in-law, whose brother was disappeared with his wife and child<sup>46</sup>, was supportive. And while Chicha was raising three children and taking care of her rapidly deteriorating husband, she found a friend in Carmen Perez, the ex presa whose description of her own experience at La Perla is quoted above. Like Carlos, Carmen’s husband was also suffering from severe psychological and neurological damage. Carmen and Chicha met at the headquarters of Familiares (before the AEPPC formed) around 2001 or 2002. Chicha said that Carmen helped her spiritually, and she felt understood by Carmen. Together with three ex presas whose husbands also suffered from severe health problems, Chicha conducted an informal health survey of ex presos in Córdoba in the early 2000s. Her husband’s case was extreme, Chicha said, but it was not unique. “*Sí, hay gente que postrado como mi esposo quien estado detenido en centros clandestinos. La gran mayoría lo que han sucedido muy torturados.*” (Yes, there are people that were detained in clandestine centers who were confined to a bed like my husband. The vast majority are those who had been severely tortured.) Chicha’s assessment of the extent of neurological damage among ex presos is only anecdotal, and there

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<sup>46</sup> That child was the first missing grandchild to be found in Córdoba.

has been no systematic study of the effects that torture had on the ex presos, particularly as they have aged.

In addition to the individual injuries inflicted on the ex presos, the effects of torture and imprisonment reverberated through family life. Because ex presos lacked social and governmental support, those who suffered from severe health complications also unwittingly brought suffering on their entire families. As the only non-ex presa in the AEPPC, Chicha reminded me of this fact:

State terrorism is not something that only concerns my husband and the compañeros that were imprisoned, but also the family. State terrorism is what the wife suffered, the siblings, the children. They are discriminated against—“for some reason he was imprisoned.” My children were discriminated against in my neighborhood because their father was a prisoner. After the trial against Menéndez came out they stopped us and greeted us with, “Isn’t it great!” But before, no one entered my house. None of the neighbors, because my husband was imprisoned (Interview CA, 9/18/2008).

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Not all of the ex presos’ health problems stem directly from having undergone torture. Just living in prison contributed to the long-term consequences that are taking a toll on their health. Upon being kidnapped, the military would hood or blindfold their captives with unwashed, dirty cloths previously used on others. This was the standard operating procedure, and these blindfolds caused eye infections, as one victim reported to the truth commission: “They put a dirty blindfold on me, very tightly, which pressed on my eyes and cut my circulation. It seriously damaged my eyesight, leaving me blind for more than thirty days after I was released from the Guerrero Centre, Jujuy...The commonest physical damage this form of torture produced was conjunctivitis. Another consequence, less common, was the infestation of the conjunctiva by maggots” (CONADEP 1984: 58). As mentioned earlier by some of the ex presos, the general lack of hygiene in all of the CCDs helped spread infections: “Conditions during the

period of detention were deplorable. Prisoners were left lying on mattresses filthy with blood, urine, vomit and sweat. In some cases, they had to relieve themselves in pots, which were later removed. In others, they weren't even given containers and had to relieve themselves on the spot" (CONADEP 1984: 66). The purpose of putting prisoners in horrific conditions was to erode their sense of humanity and individuality: "This very harsh system aggravated any diseases already suffered prior to abduction and brought on others as a result of burns, bleeding and infection: many women had their menstrual cycles interrupted because of the conditions. These were imposed with the aim of destroying the individual identity of the prisoners, this being an essential objective of the methodology we have been analyzing" (CONADEP 1984: 65).

The military treated prisoners like animals, and these living conditions contributed to the dehumanization process. Consider the way prisoners at La Perla were forced to eat, as described by Carmen:

[Y]ou pass the first few days expecting utensils to eat with, like a fork and a knife. And they tell you, "Lift up the blindfold to eat," and there you are waiting for them to hand over the utensils and they don't. And they come to you and remove the food and say: "Why didn't you eat?" "I was waiting" until a guard comes up to you, to the people, and says: "There is not a single spoon for all." To eat noodles, to eat the stew, soup. And they come in a pot that is like an oval dish that is about 15 centimeters wide, no, 15 or 20 centimeters wide and at least some 28 or 30 centimeters long, that is made out of aluminum and belongs to the army (Interview CP, 8/24/2008).

And the food they were served was insufficient:

The infrequency and inferiority of meals constituted another form of torment. Prisoners were fed – depending on the centre—once or twice a day, but on many occasions several days went by when they were given no food at all. At other times they were given water with flour or raw offal. In general, rations were barely enough, and anybody who tried to

give some to another person in a worse state than themselves was severely punished. Solidarity was forbidden” (CONADEP 1984:64).

Ex presos believe that many of their health problems were caused by severe malnutrition and low-quality foods. Ex presos believe that they suffer disproportionately from tooth decay and tooth loss as well as from weakened bone structure because of the lack of vitamins and the lack of exercise that characterized their lives in prison.

In addition, ex presos had no control over when they could use the bathroom. Ex presos explained that in the camps they were allowed to go to the bathroom just once a day, because the military officers insisted on escorting them, to the stall and back. When they were transferred to common prisons, the ex presos would relieve themselves in a small tin can, which was emptied once a day. The inability to go to the bathroom when needed, in addition to severe beatings, has contributed, the ex presos believe, to kidney-related diseases and bladder problems among their *compañeros*.

For Viviana Vergara, the poor diet, constant bright lights, and cramped cell all contributed to her overall poor physical condition:

Yes, losing the molars, this type of thing. Visual loss -- I got out and immediately I had to get glasses, or at the very least had to read with glasses. Later, severe and chronic gastritis that I still have because of all of the fat that I had eaten. The majority came out [of prison] with some kind of gastritis in their ulcer. I had gastritis but it was chronic because of the quantity of fat that we ate. We ate a lot of fat in prison, fat from lamb, from pork but fat constantly—and since we didn’t have butter in Devoto, we used the fat to make cake, desserts or things like this, because we could receive flour.<sup>48</sup> We could reduce the fat from the pork. We made it like butter and with this we made cakes, desserts and we drank mate all day, and this is why we have gastritis. What other physical consequences? No, nothing more than visual, gastritis; odontology was one thing out of all. I had to practically use prosthetics in Devoto. I never went to the dentist in the penitentiary since they don’t use anesthesia. They don’t wait for the anesthesia to

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<sup>48</sup> Villa Devoto was the only clandestine detention center that allowed prisoners to cook for themselves. But even this privilege was limited by the equipment they had—one small electric stove—and the ingredients they could use. Their captors provided limited quantities of a few goods; the rest came in small packages sent to prisoners by their families.

take effect and they don't ask you if it does. So, one time, I wanted them to fix something and I didn't get anesthesia and I grabbed the dentist's arm. And I didn't go again to the dentist, so I ended up losing a lot of my molars. Spine problems since the bunks were on top of the other and we touched the bottom below. Generally we would gather together below [in the cell] when we were reading letters, books constantly so that we all left with spine problems, cervical problems (Interview VV, 8/26/2008).

For Viviana, the high-fat foods left her with digestion problems, and the constant fluorescent light in her cell caused permanent damage to her eyesight. However, it was not only the prison conditions that impacted prisoners, but also simply being in prison and not having access to basic health services. Most of the ex presos have missing teeth and they trace their dental problems to their years in prison when they lacked proper dental care. When the military offered Viviana dental care, they did so without anesthesia. Refusing the dental "treatment" was more appealing than being subjected to intentional pain. Also, being confined to a small space without exercise, and sleeping on concrete slabs placed a tremendous amount of stress on the body. Even in the prisons where conditions were slightly better—in Villa Devoto they could read, something not permitted in other camps—Viviana believes that this privilege of reading ended up giving her spinal and neck problems from sitting in awkward positions on the floor of her cell and from not having enough space to stretch out.

Returning to the theme of resistance, even when the ex presos were being subjected to torture and inhumane conditions, they found psychological ways to cope with what was happening to them. In this way, they found an escape, even if it was mental and not physical:

I have very thick myopia. At that time...this form...one can generalize, they can break your capillary vessels. They were produced, eh, by dunkings. It cuts off your breathing. I was outside my body. A...how do you say? It's...no, no, what was it. A protective recourse to get out. In one opportunity, I was on the fifth, and they had come to look for me to do a study, and they wouldn't let me leave. Therefore it's a resource of...the last sensation that I had was felt only halfway, in, so when I got out, I was closed in. It's a bit complicated to tell this story! (laughter) (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

In this passage—which Ely Eichenberger admitted was somewhat convoluted—Ely explained that when her torturers were doing the submarine on her, the suffocation and choking strained her eyes and, as a result, broke the capillaries around her irises. In order to cope with the feelings of drowning, she separated her mind from her body—as she put it, “I was outside of my body.” However, the mechanisms that helped her survival in prison also remained with her after she was released. Ely described herself as being “closed in” as a result of her mind/body separation. Since her release, Ely has embraced biodanza, a form of therapy, dance, and emotional expression that began in Chile in 1970. Ely told me that biodanza has helped her reintegrate her body and her mind. While separating her mind from her body is not helpful in her everyday life as a freed person, it allowed her to survive torture.

One of the other consequences of Ely’s imprisonment is her difficulty remembering names. In her recorded interview, I asked Ely about the time I first learned about her inability to recall the names of *compañeros*. It happened while during a meeting in which we were discussing a documentary film the AEPPC was making about UP1 in Córdoba:

Rebekah: One time you told me, when we were in the meeting for the documentary, and how sometimes, you have problems remembering the names of your *compañeros*—that this was a consequence [of state terrorism].

Ely: That, yes. That, yes, because with so much force, my psychologist—my psychiatrist said that this, that that they call it reactive amnesia: You ask me a question and it’s a question you know I know, I can’t respond. You say to me, what do I know, something stupid, you ask me, “What is the name of your grandson?” My grandson?—No.” They asked me like this and I cover it up. Because with such force put into not knowing, during the torture, that I had to stay with the circuit [electric shock torture], so when you ask me a question, I make myself go blank. So I have to wait a little bit, and after it comes out well, the memory. That they call reactive amnesia, a consequence (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

Knowing that they were targeted, activists involved in various movements braced themselves for interrogation sessions and were instructed to not reveal the names of their fellow *compañeros*.



Ely recalled denying all of the accusations that the military made and refused to confirm any information when she was tortured. When asked for names, she responded by going blank, forcing herself to forget, because if she remembered, then she could risk giving up a name. So strong was her mental reformulation, however, that this mental strategy stayed with her long after she was released from prison and was no longer subjected to torture. Ely told me that her problem with names was common among other compañeros for the same reason. The ex presos distinguish themselves from collaborators and claim that they did not break under torture, and instead withstood it to protect others and the political movement.

While Ely was able to harness her mental powers, she was less able to prevent physical problems. Similar to Viviana, Ely also reported suffering from bone damage—but she attributed it to the temperature and cold water:

Yes, I have arthritis—osteoarthritis—it’s in the family. That is, let’s see...the atrophy is when there is no juice—right in the joints. I come from a family that—for many years they were farm workers that worked a lot in the sun so this is fairly typical with farm workers that work with the land. It’s not like the landowners, yeah? Like the workers of the world! Later, they were laborers, that is, that had always worked in manual labor. And all of the family has osteoarthritis that has to do with the work they did during, I mean that had worked a lot, too much. But also, I think that we took cold baths in 1976, as well as ’77, we bathed in cold water, in the winter and summer. Recently... ahh.. afmme...middle or at the end of ’77 they put on hot water. We bathed in cold water. In winter and summer, that has something to do with it as well. I mean, yes, I have problems with osteoarthritis (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

Although Ely explained that she is essentially predisposed to arthritis because of her family’s history of being farm workers, she believes the cold showers were what really damaged her bones. One ex preso, Ovidio “Pajarito” Ramon Ferreira<sup>49</sup>, claimed that the being forced to

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<sup>49</sup> Pajarito--he earned this nickname, which means little bird, for singing during the seven years he spent in prison. He was first targeted by the military because of his involvement in labor unions.

shower under cold water was actually a form of torture—turning what should have been a normal activity into an act that weakened their systems and their bodies:

In the beginning they almost never took us to bathe, or to the patio, or allowed us to speak, but later they took us to shower, but with freezing water, because, more than a matter of hygiene, it was a form of torture that they wanted to inflict upon us. Not that they wanted but that they applied it, they didn't do for hygienic purposes but above all else to torture. It was really cold and we had to bathe in freezing water that when the water drops fell it was like needles that punctured, like a splinter that punctured. But you had to shower, it was logical. [Although] sometimes they had us shower four times a day, and it happened in Córdoba where there was the military (Interview PO, 10/27/2008).

For Pajarito, the showers were not about cleanliness but inflicting more pain on prisoners. In her interview, Sara listed the common problems among her compañeros, and while she doesn't mention cold showers, she does cite problems with arthritis, cold temperatures, and bone deterioration:

With everything that we lived through, the state hasn't recognized it, for the torture and we are always saying, "We have to keep at it." Because of all of the physical harm, the osteoarthritis problems, the visual problems, that we slept with the light on, all day with the light on, the fluorescent light in the cell, the cold because we didn't have heat, the cells were freezing, the hallway was freezing, there was no sun—all of this produced wear and tear on the bones (Interview SW, 9/28/2008).

Ex presos recalled their cold cells, particularly in the winters. They remembered being without proper clothes and blankets. They believe that the constant exposure to cold temperature has led to bone problems and arthritic conditions.

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For some ex presos, it was the overall experience of having been tortured and imprisoned, rather than specific torture methods that produced psychological and emotional responses after their release. For Fidel "Antonio" Alcázar<sup>50</sup>, the biggest effect was his desire for justice:

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<sup>50</sup> Antonio was imprisoned for four years and eight months for being a sympathizer of leftist movements.

Well, look, the consequence I think, on my part is that it gave me a lot of anger against the military—and I think that the sentencing of Menéndez right now is an alleviation, and the sentencing against all military offices is, let's say, like, an alleviation for the lack of peaceful spirit after all that happened, all of these things, and what happened to all of us. I don't see it as vengeance but as justice, because I think having laws in a country, I mean, it's a very particular thought and it was what was political in general, having laws in a country, they committed crimes against humanity, because they didn't respect any law, they didn't try anyone but instead killed and tortured them indiscriminately (Interview AC, 10/21/2008).

For Antonio, the problem that persisted after his release had less to do with his own physical body and more with his anger at the absence of an official recognition that he had been wronged. Elsewhere in his interview, Antonio said the sentencing of those who were responsible for his torture and imprisonment gave him a sense of lightness—as he put it, his spirit was alleviated by the trials. Antonio's feelings, if shared by many others, carry serious implications for arguments in favor of trials in post-war or post-mass violence settings, particularly in places where truth commissions are created in place of trials. Ana Deutsch<sup>51</sup>, one of the co-founders of the Los Angeles-based NGO Program for Torture Victims, believes a connection exists between post-traumatic stress disorder and an absence of justice (March 8, 2010, public lecture). Deutsch argues that torture leaves individuals feeling powerless and that impunity only serves to undermine feelings of safety and recognition that a torture victim has been wronged. The continued desire for justice, even thirty years later, can also be seen as a commitment to resistance. Sentencing military officials validated the experiences of many ex presos and constituted the first official acknowledgement that their involvement in leftist movements did not merit torture and illegal imprisonment.

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<sup>51</sup> Ana Deutsch's maiden name is Clerico.

Americo Ascidia also felt that he suffered more mentally than physically from his kidnapping and imprisonment. He reported a rather serious mental illness that he believed he developed from his time in prison:

**Americo:** Ready now, I'm going to grab you so that you have my case. I lived a type of schizophrenia in the last 15 years of my life, something that I didn't realize because I denied my state.

**Rebekah:** Schizophrenia?

**Americo:** A type of schizophrenia, schizophrenia is a...

**Rebekah:** Yes, I know...

**Americo:** Well, I appeared like a normal man, but what happened, that I resolved it on my own, in my family with my own children, it was a normal reaction, beyond that there were moments and days that I got into my workshop. And I wouldn't appear all day and I didn't want to be with them because I didn't feel good, or because I was very aggressive. Then I was working...working on my thing, and I...it was like it would calm me.

One day I went to see a doctor to check me out because of my ailments: a pressure shock and then I'd faint. The guy said, "You don't have anything." And I snubbed him right back, "How can you tell me this, I'm not fine—son of a bitch!" I was a walking, ticking bomb.

On another day, we were at a bakery, me with my wife, drinking something, and someone came up to me and touched me from behind. When we were imprisoned and were touched there from behind, like this [he extends his hand out as if he is reaching for someone's back], it meant a filthy death sometimes, because—or you turn around and they hit you. It was a reaction from that time when the baton was right there, or the nightstick, was coming...the guy put his hand there to greet me and I turned around and I almost put him to the ground, in the middle of...a public place.

And, well, I denied this. My children knew a little about my life, and I denied this. For example, I was sleeping at night and my wife would be crying next to me, she'd wake up crying because I had jabbed her with my elbow or kicked her. And she insisted that we go to a psychologist, and for me to go to a psychologist was something I do if I was crazy--and I wasn't crazy.

Well, in this sense, this was the attitude in my life, they knew that I had a point that when you got me at this point I couldn't control it. They already knew it. Well, these are the consequences that I lived through. Or I heard, my children one day gave me a gift, my grandchildren gave me gifts of little whistles from the carnivals. Well, I heard a whistle and it drove me crazy. I got all irritated, this whistle reminded me of having to follow orders. So when I felt this whistle, and I would lie down because it was like there was a cloud over me. And all of those around me watched and they didn't know what to do.

I lived, let's say, without being treated psychologically. I lived through fucked up consequences in my normal life. I did not drink, I didn't smoke. So there was no one particular situation that would trigger my reactions. Well, this was a matter of contention because those who surrounded me didn't know how to contain me, because after talking openly with the compañeros, we realized that there were no psychologists, there was no psychologist for us (Interview AA, 4/22/2009).

Americo's story of nearly pinning his friend to the ground was not uncommon. For ex presas, small gestures, smells, and sounds often evoked negative memories from prison and triggered extreme responses of self-defense.

Ester Cabral recalled a time when a boy on the street tried to sell her perfume and she reacted very harshly. The owner of a nearby kiosk told her not to be so hard on the kid because he was just trying to make a living. Upon reflection, Ester realized that cologne reminded her of her torturer. While she couldn't see him through his blindfold, she still remembers the stench of his heavy cologne.<sup>52</sup> In fact, I witnessed one instance of a sensory memory trigger when I was standing and chatting with three ex presas and a boy asking for money approached "Pamela,"<sup>53</sup> a survivor. He approached her from behind,<sup>54</sup> and Pamela immediately tightened, and experienced what she described as a "panic attack." She had held her hand to her chest because her heart was beating fast and she had noticeably begun to breathe harder and faster. Afterward, she explained that this is how she was kidnapped—they came up to her from behind and put a knife to her. A few days later, she told me that she was still shaken from the emotions and memories that resurfaced as a result of the boy's having coming up to her from behind. While there was nothing particularly diagnosable in this instance, or life threatening, this is but one illustration of how survivors live with memories of past violence. Based on conversations at meetings and in social

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<sup>52</sup> Fieldnotes, 7/20/2008.

<sup>53</sup> Pamela is not in the Association, though she too is a survivor of the concentration camps and prisons. She was detained for having searched for her disappeared brother. Fieldnotes, 9/18/2008.

<sup>54</sup> Fieldnotes, 9/18/2008.

settings, I learned that many of the ex presos have problems with depression and have difficulty sleeping. It is common for them to recall prison experiences during normal activities, to feel what would seem to be irrational fear, and to be moved to sudden outbursts of anger.

Still, the levels of long-term suffering varied widely among the ex presos; some felt, or said that they felt, that they were doing fine. This is how Atilio Basso<sup>55</sup> described his condition:

Well, I suppose that it's not the same with everybody, not all suffered with the same intensity. Not all lived through the same thing, but well, there are some consequences that for sure remained, problems of physical deterioration that appear with time, problems with joints, vision, teeth, a whole set of teeth, but luckily I don't think the problems I have are grave. And, well, I also think that I'm psychologically healthy, in spite of the memories that are always sad, that move us very much, the feelings—that could also be a consequence, of being sensitive in certain situations, and that, let's say, that causes us much pain the memory of many compañeros (Interview AB, 10/23/2008).

In his interview, Atilio was very reserved and did not speak about any problems that he suffered from, and simply did not think that he was facing any serious problems. But before I left Argentina, I had several personal conversations with Atilio where he spoke in greater depth and at greater length about his time in prison and the ways that imprisonment had affected him both physically and mentally. After one of the last AEPPC meetings I attended, several of us went out for red wine and pizza. As I sat next to Atilio, he began speaking very candidly about painful memories that dated back to his time in prison, and about his own recent physical and emotional problems. He wanted to convey to me that he, too, suffered—despite his having spoken very little about it in his interview.

On March 16, 2010, not long after I returned to the U.S., Atilio died from heart failure. His compañeros believe that his heart condition was a direct result of having been tortured and living under constant stress in prison.

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<sup>55</sup> Atilio was imprisoned for four years and six months for being a part of the Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores (PRT).

Atilio reminded me in our interview that there is much variation among the ex presos. While the ex presos were roughly the same age when they were detained, they came from different backgrounds, believed in different ideologies, responded to torture in varied ways, and each had to overcome unique challenges to reintegrate back into family and social life, a process that was shaped by multiple factors, including the way the people around them treated survivors. However, Atilio mentioned some of the common physical problems already discussed here—problems with joints, eyes, and teeth. Both diet and the poor living conditions created this particular set of physical consequences, even if not all ex presos were affected. Also significant is Atilio’s mention of memories and how they lead to sadness. Many ex presos talked about depression, and the loss they felt in no longer being part of the social movements that had enriched and in many ways defined their lives, as well as the loss of their *compañeros* that they fondly remember. While this feeling of sadness is neither measurable nor does it cause a specific type of physical or psychological pain, it is for many a consequence of the past.

When recalling these memories of torture and imprisonment, ex presos spoke about their own strategies of resistance—from choosing to soil themselves to intentionally blanking out on names while being electrocuted—or those of their fellow *compañeros*, like Monica who sang songs blaming her torturers for her possible death while she was being beaten. They also demonstrated their resilience by *not* acknowledging publicly that they had been affected. Rather than this being an outright contradiction—of asking for reparations on the basis of their torture victim status and then stating that they came out of prison relatively unharmed—this simultaneous acknowledgment and denial is a reflection of the coexistence of the ex presos’ reality—that they were and continue to be affected by the past violence—alongside their belief that they emerged from their ordeal as victors. The military tried to destroy them as people,

using torture and imprisonment as a way to instill enough fear to prevent them from ever wanting to engage in any future political activities. In their oral history interviews, which they treated as permanent records of their past, the ex presos speak about their political awakenings, the history of social movements, their time in detention, and their ability to continue with political activities in the AEPPC. By suggesting that—despite all that they endured—they are fine, the ex presos are also defiantly stating that the military did not succeed in silencing them, even with their brutal methods.

### **Fight for Reparations**

According to the then AEPPC President Sara Waitman, an estimated 1,200 ex presos live in Córdoba province. Collecting reports from around the province, Sara was able to count 62 ex presos who were between the ages of 55 and 62 when they died, many of them from cancer or heart-related health problems.<sup>56</sup> This crisis in health and economic conditions among ex presos is not something that happened overnight, but a process that has gained momentum over time. Ex presos learned to live without any assistance for several decades, but when they began nearing retirement age, the health effects became more pronounced as they aged, and these impacts began to profoundly affect their quality of life, precisely at the time when they were least able to take care of themselves or to continue working without benefits. In response to their mounting problems – physical and psychological, as well as emotional and financial—ex presos in Córdoba began meeting in 2003 in hopes of lobbying the government for a reparations programs.

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<sup>56</sup> These data are from an interview with Sara Waitman, and an internal document (4/25/2011) circulated by Sara to the Association. Inspired by my inquiries and comments about a number of recent several deaths, Sara decided to begin compiling a list of all ex presos who died after their release. Included alongside each ex preso's name is her age at the time of death, and the cause of death, if known. The list is still under construction, and the number—62—was current as of this writing.



While the AEPPC seeks more prominent roles in memorialized spaces—a form of symbolic reparation—the ex presos believe the more significant form of reparation is a financial one, specifically, pensions to compensate for the torture and subsequent discrimination they suffered.

Previous scholars have shown that reparations operate in relation to other transitional justice efforts (Johnston and Slyomovics 2009; Jelin 2007) and that individual nations implement reparation programs that are based on international human rights law within their own particular cultural, political, and historical contexts (Slyomovics 2009a; Burnet 2011; Woolford 2011). Lisa LaPlante and Kimberly Theidon, for instance, argue that the truth commission set up in 2001 is an insufficient remedy for the Peruvian survivors of the internal armed conflict between guerilla groups, the armed peasant patrols and the Peruvian armed forces; concrete remedies must be provided for participants to feel that publicly airing their stories in a truth commission has a purpose (2007:231). Not only is it essential that truth commissions follow through with reparations, but “the way truth commissions define victims and victim reparations through the lens of human rights has important implications for the interpretation and (re)construction of the past” (Garcia-Godos 2998:64). According to Jemima Garcia-Godos, “the identification of victims and violations as neat categories, as necessary as it is for the practical formulation of a specific reparations policy, does not reflect a complex social reality” (2008:67). Furthermore, states rarely take into account how the victims perceive and experience the reparations, as Lieselotte Viaene found with the Mayan Q’eqchi in Guatemala, whose ideas of reparations differed from and involved more than economic compensation (2010:8). Thus, states should consider cultural factors and local contexts when implementing reparations (Viaene 2010).

In Argentina, because the transitional justice process has predominantly focused on the desaparecidos and their families, the ex presos’ and their economic needs have received less

attention. Furthermore, the official narratives' labeling of victims and perpetrators has excluded *ex presos* from being seen as victims worthy of reparations—symbolic or material.

In general, because of the lack of public documentation, little scholarship on Argentina's reparations for any group of victims exists; María José Guembe's (2006) case study on Argentina's reparations programs is one of the few available (cf. Mallinder 2009). because of the lack of public documentation. The National Congress passed Law 24.043 on November 27, 1991, where victims of arbitrary detentions between November 6, 1974 and December 10, 1983 were paid in bonds with \$74 (in U.S. dollars) face value for each day of detention (Guembe 2006:31). Law 24.043 passed in January 1992, but the government did not start paying reparations to approximately 7,800 petitioners until 1994 (Guembe 2006:33, 34).

Alfonsín's government also awarded \$224,000 in bonds to the families of every disappeared person in 1994 (Law 24.411) but the move was highly controversial and many felt guilt. One faction of the Madres, the Association of Madres de Plaza de Mayo, denounced the payments as "blood money," and the group's president, Hebe de Bonafini, said that accepting the reparations would amount to the Madres, "prostituting themselves" (Guembe 2006:38). Families were concerned that the reparations were intended to buy their silence, in exchange for the impunity that had already been granted to perpetrators (Guembe 2006: 35).

In contrast to the public disagreement over the payments to the families of the disappeared, Guembe posits that reparations for political prisoners were unremarkable, but some *ex presos* felt that they were negatively judged for accepting reparations, as Norma Peralta, an *ex presa* kidnapped in 1974 for her involvement in the Workers Revolutionary Party, said: [T]he indemnity also brought with it problems and contradictions with the community, I think.

Because it was questioned by everyone, including the human rights organizations (NP Interview, 10/30/2008).

Guembe found that public information on how much was paid to each former detainee did not exist, and that the impact of reparations in Argentina was unknown (2006:46). But in my personal conversations and in some interviews with ex presos, I was able to learn about the government reparations that were paid in the 1990s and how these payments were received, saved, and spent by the ex presos. I will briefly discuss one case study anonymously; it illustrates why ex presos are petitioning for further economic reparations:

In 1994, the Ministry of the Interior awarded one ex preso U\$S 63,237.02 worth of Argentine sovereign bonds in compensation for 847 days of detention. Because Menem had pegged the peso to the dollar in 1991, the bonds could be issued either in US dollars or Argentine pesos. This ex preso reported that he would have had to have waited seven years—not 16, as Guembe reported (2006:33)—for the bonds to mature.

But like other ex presos who came out of prison jobless, often with families to support, or in similarly dire financial situations, he could not wait and decided to sell his bonds at market rate. He put his bonds in a *caja de valores* (a securities depository), which charged a brokerage fee of \$7,489 that immediately reduced the value of his bonds to \$55,748.10. He instructed the brokers to sell the bonds at four different points during 1994. The first time he sold \$15,748 worth of bonds at the rate of about 67 percent, and received \$10,580.21. The second time \$7000 was exchanged at the rate of 65 percent, netting him \$4,585. The third time \$3000 was exchanged at 66.5 percent, giving this ex preso \$1995. The fourth and final time he sold bonds, he received \$19,532 after selling the remaining \$30,000 worth at about 65.5 percent. In the end, he recovered only U\$S 36,692 dollars from the bonds, meaning that he lost out on \$26,545 less

than the total amount the state owed. Those who did wait seven years, ironically, received the least of all, when Argentina's 2001 economic collapse sent the value of their bonds plummeting to about 50 percent of their original value.

For the AEPPC members, the reparations under Law 24.043 were not enough financially or morally. The majority of ex presos were never able to obtain secure and stable employment.

Pajarito described his job history in this way:

I always worked in the black market until now. At this moment I am working at the Secretary of Human Rights, but until this moment I never could regain the social position that I had before they took me prisoner. Because I never could work ... legally ... I was practically marginalized, without health insurance, without the minimum benefits that any dignified person would have, and without the possibility of retirement, or medical attention or health insurance<sup>57</sup>, or vacations, or any raise" (Interview PO, 10/27/2008).

About the reparations, Manuel Nieva (ex preso kidnapped in 1977 for his union activities) said:

We had economic compensation for the years we spent in prison but we do not consider it just because the harms done went beyond the material, and what they paid us was not what we should have been given, because they maneuvered it with bonds. In reality it was just a palliative that allowed us to breathe a little because the money went quickly. Because the bonds were valued at market price and when we exchanged them they didn't have 100 percent value but that we had to exchange it for 50 to 60% (MN Interview, 9/5/2008).

More importantly, the reparations did not recognize them as victims of torture and state terrorism. Consequently, a national movement of ex presos began petitioning the government for pensions in 2009. At the time of this writing, two provinces have approved laws granting pensions: Buenos Aires in October 2010 and Mendoza in December 2011. Ex presos in the rest of the country are still waiting for their provincial governments to approve a pension law.

### **Pensions: A Comparative Perspective**

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<sup>57</sup> While Argentina theoretically has a free medical system, its services are not at the same level as private hospitals, and patients still must pay for a certain portion of their surgeries, medications, and specialists.

The long-term consequences and perceived shortened life expectancies have been found among other groups of political prisoners in Latin America. Neighboring countries, Chile and Uruguay, have both granted pensions to political prisoners but only after much protest and after all other victim groups had been awarded similar support first.

Although the Uruguayan dictatorship between 1973 and 1984 utilized illegal imprisonment and torture far more than disappearances, the two truth commissions—the Investigative Commission on the Situation of Disappeared People and Its Causes in 1985 and the Peace Commission conducted in 2000-2003—did not investigate any other violations apart from the disappearances and had limited results in producing national truths and advancing trials against ex military officials (Hayner 2011:243, 251.) However, members of civil society organizations there have also reported a connection between state terrorism and dying early; of the 38 political prisoners who died in 2011 in Uruguay, more than half (60 percent) were under the age of 70 (<http://www.estaesmia.com/index.php/archives/652>). Similarly, Uruguayan political prisoners also attribute the early deaths—from a variety of causes including cancer and stroke—to being victims of torture. With pressure from civil society and human rights organizations, Uruguayan political prisoners have benefited from pensions under the Integral Reparation Law 18.596 (article 12) passed on September 18, 2009.

In Chile, political prisoners who were detained under General Pinochet's dictatorship (1973-1990) also faced similar consequences from torture and detainment:

[The political prisoners] suffered from the ways in which they were incarcerated, the trauma of torture, the social stigma attached to their imprisonment, the difficulties experienced upon being released from jail, and the subsequent difficulties of being employed or self-employed afterwards, which considerably hampered their economic subsistence and that of their families (Lira 2006:75).

Yet, when the first President after Pinochet, Patricio Aylwin, formed the National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation (1990-1991), survivor testimonies were essentially left out of the process and did not feature in its final report. The Chilean truth commission identified victims of both the military and guerilla groups (Robben 2011:193). Unlike Argentina, the transitional justice process in Chile focused on reparations rather than trials—though the reparations were initially only awarded to the families of the disappeared or politically executed, political exiles, those who were unfairly dismissed from their jobs, and peasants expelled from their land. Rather than provide pensions to political prisoners, the Chilean government released the remaining 937 prisoners in 1990, and provided a one-time payment of US\$ 1,312 to help them obtain other work (Lira 2006:75). Chilean political prisoners had to wait until 2003 before Aylwin's successor, President Ricardo Lagos, created a second truth commission, the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (2002-2005), which identified 28,549 victims of political imprisonment (Hayner 2011:61). Within a year of the second truth commission's report in 2004, about 20,000 victims began to receive pensions that would pay them US\$190 per month for the rest of their lives (Hayner 2011:62).

While political prisoners in Uruguay and Chile eventually received pensions despite being ignored by truth-seeking efforts, outside of Latin America, in Morocco, political prisoners who were imprisoned during King Hassan II's dictatorship (1961- 1999) were given reparations but without truth (at least at first) and justice. According to Susan Slyomovics: "The Moroccan government's initial chosen avenues of remedies were partial restitutions, then indemnity commissions granting financial awards, and most recently a truth commission" (Slyomovics 2009b:110, 111). In exchange for being restored to their ranks and salaries as if they had never been disappeared, the government demanded that political prisoners to remain silent, and there

were no public apologies or acknowledgments of what happened before and after the detentions (Slyomovics 2009b:100). Throughout the 1990s, and later, after King Hassan died, the Moroccan government used pardons and financial payments both arbitrarily and politically in oppressing and remedying political prisoners. Since then, the situation in Morocco has changed, however. While in Argentina, political prisoners increasing public role in trials and memorials has enabled them to petition for reparations, in Morocco, the process was reversed; the restitution that the political prisoner received has “contributed to bursting open the floodgates to victims’ demands, public storytelling, and historical reconsiderations of the contested Moroccan past” (Slyomovics 2009b:103).

At the time of this writing, approximately five out twenty-three provinces in Argentina have passed legislation approving pensions for ex presos. The challenges that political prisoners have faced not only in Argentina but also in Uruguay and Chile brings attention to the difficulties individuals with political identities have in gaining victim status that will earn them reparations. These three countries have engaged in transitional justice processes, and with time, the political context has changed in favor of human rights, which has allowed political prisoners to successfully petition for pensions—or nearly so in the case of Argentina. In Morocco, political prisoners received reparations immediately, but they have also had to return to the task of contesting history. Thus, economic compensation is not enough in creating a comprehensive approach to reparations (e.g. memorials and trials) for political prisoners, but it is a crucial component—one that is seen as a human right.

The 1991 reparations in Argentina were insufficient in compensating for the fact that many never returned to a normal, ordinary life. One ex preso Hugo Ferrandans (imprisoned in 1976 for being a member of the Communist Party) said:

That indemnity served to fight against urgent needs but it didn't help me to recover my life and return to normalcy. Life for the majority of us never returned to normal. We were never normal people again. We worked *en negro*—you went to work some place but they wouldn't legalize you because those weren't the conditions (HF Interview, 5/9/2009).

Pensions would acknowledge the aftereffects of torture and the stigmas attached to imprisonment, rather than fixing a particular amount of money to specific violations, many of which are too abstract to monetize.

In post-mass violence settings, the focus is on deaths—as bodies can be counted—or on torture—as scars can be measured. The loss of a potential future, however, is not considered to be a human rights violation to be compensated for in periods of transitional justice. The assumption that mere survival is good enough, or is enough, falls short when considering the changes, losses, and ugly memories one must continue to face and live with in the absence of others and in the mourning processes of what could have been.

State violence affects victims over the course of their lives, and demands a reassessment of the assumption that past transitional justice efforts—a series of “one-time” events—can sufficiently redress the grievances of victims over time. Giving reparations once is not enough for survivors who continue to face problems related to state terrorism. Transitional justice processes are often non-linear process and involve setbacks, adjustments, and small successes. But just as the damage done to survivors endures over time, transitional justice policies should be conceived as an ongoing political commitment to memory, truth, and justice.

The way ex presos are aging is one illustration of why transitional justice is a long-term process. Aging is not only about the decline of physical and mental health, but also about previous life events positively or negatively affecting one's later status in life. Ex presos are organizing to recover a part of what they lost. In compensating the victims who have missed



opportunities in their lives as a direct result of state terrorism, transitional justice should include employment and pensions in addition to simple reparations for having been imprisoned. This recovery process takes time, is beholden to the general societal context, and depends upon the government's ability to attend to issues arising later in the lives of those affected by the regime or regimes that preceded it. The current organizing efforts of the AEPPC three decades after the fall of the dictatorship demonstrates just how long the effects of state terrorism last, and correspondingly, how long the process of transitional justice must continue.

The way in which the ex presos speak about their experiences of torture and the stories they choose to tell at memorialized spaces leads me to believe that what helped ex presos survive was their commitment to their political identity. In prison, to withstand the picana and submarino required something more than mere physical tolerance for pain; it required a very particular mentality. Today, the ex presos pride themselves on not being collaborators; they endured what the military did to them in order to remain silent. The contradiction of saying that they are fine (meaning they do not suffer any effects from torture and imprisonment) publicly, while talking about their problems in person or in meetings is a demonstration of how they want to be remembered more broadly in history—as activists and resisters—and how they want to be compensated—as victims of state terrorism who face difficulty as they age and the prospect of an early death because of what happened to them decades earlier. The ex presos maintain that they are, first and foremost, militants; this is key because if they were only interested in gaining economic reparations, their case would be stronger if they painted themselves solely as torture victims.

In addition, using their political identities was as much a necessity as it was a choice. Though there have been efforts to offer psychological treatment to former political prisoners in

Argentina, the overall political and social environment stigmatized ex presos to the extent that it discouraged survivors even from publicly acknowledging that they had once been imprisoned. Moreover, presenting oneself as broken would also suggest that the military succeeded in damaging the militants. The majority of torture survivors never sought help or counseling for their psychological trauma, for financial reasons as well as those already stated. With the formation of the AEPPC, ex presos for the first time had an opportunity to connect with others.

As Sara Waitman said:

Many *compañeros* (“colleagues”) separated from their spouses...they couldn’t incorporate themselves into the larger social struggle and were left marginalized, and they are the ones living in the worst circumstances. These are same people who have been drawn to the association [AEPPC]. It was like they had begun to see another possibility to engage in activities together. The association helps, no? It is a lot like a therapy group (Interview SW, 8/28/2008).

In their space, ex presos are able to freely speak about their experiences and be understood; there are no questions asked as to why they were involved politically or if it was worth it. They are instead approved of and legitimated for their commitment to political and social movements, then and now.

In short, ex presos were forced to survive on their own. Those who are part of the AEPPC are the ones who are well enough to attend the meetings and have a desire to be politically involved. Thus, the connection between maintaining a political identity and survival is one that is only available to those who are both physically and psychologically well, and who have a desire to be militants. When asked who does and does not belong in the AEPPC, *compañeros* say that there are many more who would join but for their terrible economic or health conditions that prevent them from being involved or from traveling to Córdoba for meetings. They also say that many survivors decided to cut themselves off from any political affiliation or activity, either voluntarily or because they were forced to by their non-militant families, spouses, and social

contacts. AEPPC members believe that they represent the middle ground of the broader survivor community. They are neither the poorest nor the richest. (The wealthy ex presos have no need to fight for reparations.)

Returning to Lear's concept of radical hope, the ex presos who have maintained their militant identities harbor no illusions that they are living under the same conditions as before. They have adapted to the new economy by engaging in capitalistic endeavors themselves, but they still actively lament the loss of their social movements, even as they seek to revive them. What was lost in the dictatorship was something more than bodies, but also a dream. Ex presos explain why they were taken by stating that they thought differently and wanted something that was counter to the capitalist, neoliberal dream. Alicia Staps says, "I wanted social justice for all." While this phrase seems vague, it indexes an entire social movement rooted in the 1960s and 1970s that is associated with the Left: labor unions, higher wages, free education, public services, and so on.

For many of the ex presos, the moments when they discovered their own radicalization become an important rite of passage in their youth. Understanding how or when they became involved in various social justice movements not only revealed their long-term commitments to revolutionary causes, but also explains why they were taken to prison. Ely Eichenberger, for instance, described how she became politicized when she went to film school:

This was a discovery for me, no? Because it was like...expanding the mind, I mean, I was very disciplined in my studies, with...with social manners, et cetera, et cetera, but not with a great sensitivity but I had not at that point discovered that the world could be something else. That one could change the world, that is to say, this came along with another discovery that the people I thought had possibilities, didn't...that they were going to get out since they couldn't get out from where they were." (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

By explicitly stating that they know why they were taken by the military—rather than portraying themselves as innocent youth who were randomly kidnapped—the ex presos are validating their position and saying that they posed a real threat to the established order.

In one of my last interviews, I offered my theory on the relationship between their political identities and what I saw as a tendency for the ex presos to not speak about any health problems they were suffering from that were connected to their torture and imprisonment. I presented this to Americo Aspitia:

**Rebekah:** Yeah, I have two theories about the ex presos that I got from the compañeros. One is that nobody had resources, one couldn't buy or pay to go see a psychologist, or didn't have the option to have psychological treatment because they had to survive, or else they wouldn't have enough money. Also the climate in Argentina was that people couldn't speak, and so they had to go on and fight without help.

Also I think that the human rights groups rejected the survivors for having survived—why did they survive? And I think because of this the Association formed many years afterward in a country that has an established human rights movement—in comparison to other countries. No one really studied the ex presos, no one really knew. Practically everyone in the U.S. who knows about the dictatorship knows about the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and about the missing grandchildren, but not about the ex presos políticos. I think that you all couldn't speak about your pain and for this reason a lot of compañeros don't admit to having problems. But also because I think you are militants, and you didn't want to lose [the fight against the military] in order to feel good—it's a way to fight in a way... I don't know.

**Americo:** Yes, I like it, I like what you described.

**Rebekah:** It's like the military tried to destroy everything in the ex preso and to reject the pain was to win, in a way.

**Americo:** Yes, I think your synthesis is very good.

**Rebekah:** It's very complicated because to gain reparations like the universal pensions, you have to admit to the public that you suffered consequences, but in public presentations you all don't want to talk about torture, you want to talk about militancy, so it's very complicated because you all have effects but nobody wants to talk about the effects.

**Americo:** It's like this. That's good what you said. It's like there was a trauma that is being uncovered before the people saying, "Look, we are a group of people, or, I am a person with a lot of problems, that I was left with a lot of problems and these are the

problems.” I tell you, now that I feel motivated to tell them—one day we went to a meeting of ex presos, and we were having like a catharsis, me no, I couldn’t. I can with you right now extend myself maybe for your human quality, but two or three started to say things. One said, “No but my wife is paralyzed. I don’t have anything. I fix shoes.” I think that you were there that day, in Sara’s house, “Monito”... I don’t remember his last name. And he said, “My wife is paralyzed, every time I entered her room to do something, she’d say to me, “You’re a son of a bitch, because of you I’m here.” That is, the blame of what happened to her was put on him, he said, “I don’t know what else to do and my daughter tells me this as well.” Look the context that this guy is in, every time he enters the bedroom the girl said, “You are a son of a bitch, you’re why I’m here, look at what you...”

And they started out like this, to encourage each other to do this, to motivate themselves around what you said, to express the point you made. It’s because they are in bad shape, you need someone to listen. You’re asking for help, you’re calling for attention. Well, I never called attention to myself, I didn’t want attention. And this was my first personal damage, to myself, to not acknowledge that I was sick, and that I needed help. You are right. That is one of the characteristics that we have, it’s a kind of...we made ourselves tough, the strong, and we had a lot of weak sides that we didn’t want people discovering. But it’s the truth, your synthesis is very good. Of course, you have to later expand it, but I think this view that I also have, I share it with you, the four things that you said about our life as presos: no attention, no studies, that we did not encourage ourselves in front of the community, and we didn’t say anything, what you summarizes was very good, based on your experience, practice and chatting and more (Interview with AA 4/22/2009).

My summary to Americo about the ex presos revolved around two major points. First, I believed that the ex presos had to learn to deal with their problems on their own because they were either too traumatized to seek help, unable to seek help for financial reasons, or unwilling to do so out of fear of being found out as a person who had once been imprisoned. This invisibility of the ex presos and the problems they were suffering from also meant that they were not major subjects of academic research that could have brought more attention to them as a group of victims.

Second, I believe their commitment to their militant identities is what enabled them to survive the prisons. Ex presos’ stories about resistance in prison depart from Jacobo Timerman’s account of his detention, in which he advised other future torture victims to be passive, in order to save their energy, and to eradicate hope and memory as of way of completely disengaging and

embarking upon a solitary existence (1988:35-27). In contrast, the ex presos did the exact opposite. They sometimes refused to follow orders, recalled their professional knowledge from memory to teach others, and reached out to fellow prisoners. This identification with their militancy—that which helped them psychologically resist what was happening to them and gave them an explanation of why they had been imprisoned and were being tortured and imprisoned—remained with them after their release. The military did not defeat them--not while they were in prison, and not afterward. Upon their release, their political identity provided a sense of purpose and an explanation for why they were taken by the military. By being well--even by pretending to be well--they won the fight against the military. And while Timerman advocated a solitary existence free of hope and memory, these former political prisoners have continued their activism as ex presos, thirty years later, and hope to inspire a younger generation to follow their passion for political knowledge and involvement.

As militants, the ex presos resisted the dictatorship by thinking and acting in opposition to the National Reorganization Process, and knew that they were at risk of imprisonment. But unlike previous military dictatorships, the last dictatorship did not just imprison their political opposition, but they suspended the constitution and the legal system and tortured and killed their prisoners. However, it was their mental preparation that showed that the ex presos were anticipating consequences, which would also legitimate their political opposition. (Otherwise, their opposition would be unremarkable.) Similarly, in the U.S., protestors opposing the Vietnam War and civil rights activists engaged in civil disobedience as way to challenge U.S. policies and laws that violated the constitution. In both cases, civil disobedience was effective because they broke the law and brought attention to the injustice of the laws.

The ex presos were also engaged in civil disobedience by belonging to labor unions and political organizations that supported their socialist ideals. Legal theorist Francis Olsen explains, “Open civil disobedience serves the political goal of galvanizing opposition to the oppressive law and the political and legal goal of forcing or encouraging the courts to examine the constitutionality of the oppressive law” (2005:213). Those who break the law, however, also willingly accept the consequences of their actions, which distinguishes them from others who simply seek to break the law (2005:224). The ex presos accepted the fact that they would be imprisoned, but with the assumption that a functioning legal system would exist and that their basic rights would be acknowledged. This example is limited by the fact that Olsen’s example functions better in the U.S. where torture and disappearances were not regular practices in prison, where U.S. citizens retained their legal rights. However, in both cases, the resisters knew that the stakes accompanying their actions were high—imprisonment.

The absence of constitutional rule and abrogation of the rule of law placed the dictatorship as an extreme oppressor—the ex presos describe its actions as state terrorism—and this meant that any opposition to this kind of regime was morally correct. It is this reason that the ex presos describe the dictatorship’s actions as state terrorism. In cases of civil disobedience, western legal theorists often discuss Socrates’ decision to accept his death penalty rather than escape—to drink poison rather than go into exile—in order to maintain his values and not respond to injustice with more injustice. That is, Socrates demanded that either the judges must resign thereby demonstrating the unfairness of the law, or deliver the fullest punishment possible, because any lesser form of punishment would only serve to legitimate the cause or legal system.

In addition, Socrates would not break the law himself by escaping Athens because he wished to honor the legal system. The ex presos did not respond to the dictatorship by later killing their torturers but instead put pressure on the government to reopen trials. Olsen argues that people who engage in civil disobedience are following Socrates's example of bringing attention to a particular cause, to maintain values, and to demonstrate the injustice of a law (1992). Olsen draws a parallel to the 1973 Wounded Knee armed demonstration against the U.S. government, whereby the Indians were willing to die for their values, to be imprisoned for resisting, and to arm themselves to avoid being oppressed quietly (1992:84-86). The ex presos resisted the moral and political rules imposed on Argentine society and by going to prison, they sought to demonstrate the illegitimacy of the dictatorship's claims on authority. Some ex presos belonged to armed guerrilla organizations as a way to refuse submission. But at the point when no constitution or legal system existed, and torture and disappearances took place, the ex presos, the families of the disappeared, and the international human rights community saw not only injustice, but crimes against humanity. Thus, it was not a matter of a strict or misguided law in the Argentine case, but the absence of law altogether. For this reason, countries undergoing massive repression and violence enact transitional justice processes, in which victims of state terrorism receive compensation for the extreme injustice done to them.

Socrates's form of resistance characterizes the ex presos actions during the dictatorship, and in the aftermath, the Plenty Coups' model of change in the face of unprecedented social obliteration is emblematic of what ex presos had to experience to undergo in order to organize in a new political environment, in which their struggles are now articulated through human rights law rather than one of revolutionary resistance. The ex presos, however, did not drop their utopian ideals, they incorporated human rights into their existing commitments to popular



struggles, particularly in light of the fact that human rights lacks a broader vision for social change. On the dilemma that human rights faces, Samuel Moyn wrote:

Born in the assertion of the ‘power of the powerless,’ human rights inevitably became bound up with the power of the powerful. If ‘human rights’ stand for an exploding variety of rival political schemes, however, they still trade on the moral transcendence of politics that their original breakthrough involved. And so it may not be too late to wonder whether the concept of human rights, and the movement around it, should restrict themselves to offering minimal constraints on responsible politics, not a new form of maximal politics of their own. If human rights call to mind a few core value that demand protection, they cannot be all things to all people. Put another way, the last utopia cannot be a moral one. And so whether human rights deserve to define the utopianism of the future is still very far from being decided (2010:227).

Ex presos are savvy enough to understand that human rights is the avenue in which they can lobby for pensions, but it has not meant that they have dropped their prior commitments and identities as militants.

The ex presos are claiming reparations on the grounds that they were tortured and illegally imprisoned without trial and in inhumane conditions. Had they had fair trials and decent prison conditions, ex presos could have fully accepted the consequences of their resistance. The ex presos do not claim innocence, but oppose the ways they were detained. Claiming the higher moral ground is what precisely gives ex presos the ability to explain to themselves what happened and to understand their experience as they continue their activism today and claim reparations in compensation for the unjust consequences.

## Chapter 8

### The Event and Afterward

In spite of the general belief that uncovering the truth is beneficial for victims of violence or genocide, anthropologists have critiqued the assumption that speaking is healing in transitional justice processes (Mendeloff 2009; Moon 2009; Brounéus 2008). There is no clear understanding of what actually counts as a therapeutic practice, whether or not victims “feel better,” or what the positive implications are for those who give testimonies and also live next door to the person responsible for the crimes committed against them. The critiques are legitimate, yet at the same time, truth commissions are an important step in the broader process of facing the past and re-envisioning the future for countries undergoing political and social transformations.

Before arriving in Argentina, I, too, was skeptical of the healing powers of giving testimonies of personal experiences of violence. But I also believed in the goal of truth commissions to contradict fabrications propagated by former regimes in order to educate the broader society about what actually happened and to publicly acknowledge the crimes for the benefit of those who were victimized. There is a greater social good served in circulating the truth or truths about the past. For example, simply revealing that secret detention centers used to torture and kill people actually exist helps to counter the widespread denial on the part of the military. Furthermore, I believed that perhaps Argentina was different. It was the first country to complete and publish its truth commission findings in 1984 and it is a culture in which psychoanalysis, which has as one of its therapeutic principles that speaking about one’s life can help the person, is very popular. I thought these two facts might make the effort of speaking out to heal more effective or compelling for Argentines. In addition, giving testimony resonated

with Latin America's Catholicism with its ritual of confession (McKinney 2007:280). As a result, I was still interested in exploring whether or not recalling memories of violence was healing for ex presos in Argentina.

To study the impact of memory work, I also needed to establish a definition for healing. In transitional justice literature, healing does not get defined more than the vague notion of catharsis or overcoming feelings of revenge. Because I knew it was going to be inherently problematic and difficult to justify a definition of healing, I decided to identify a common lay definition of the term by observing and consulting with ex presos. But ex presos never spoke about healing (*sanación*), and they remained indifferent when I asked them about the subject. Ex presos told me that they were not looking to heal and that healing was not a motivation behind their participation in memory-related projects (e.g. memorials, tours, and testimonial writings).

In speaking with American colleagues about this discovery upon returning from the field, I am sometimes met with skepticism. One scholar said that while the ex presos might not use the language that, of course they want to heal. Another colleague said that the ex presos were in denial, and that their refusal to talk about healing was a sign of PTSD. It is beyond my data and capacity to state whether or not ex presos secretly want to heal or not. What I can report and analyze is what the ex presos *do* speak about at meetings, in personal conversations, and in interviews. Thus, I do not have a working definition of healing, but since the ex presos did not focus on healing, the conversation shifted so that it became irrelevant if I had a definition. Even without a definition, the discovery—that transitional justice scholars speak about healing and the ex presos do not—is nonetheless significant, and worthy of investigation.

Let me, however, expand upon the idea that ex presos secretly or ultimately desire healing. What is it that needs to be healed? It's presumed that ex presos need to be healed from

psychological damage. According to the Argentine truth commission report, the most egregious crimes suffered by victims was torture—both physical and psychological—at the hands of the military in secret prison camps. Many organizations, clinicians, and scholars have studied the effects of torture among victims of political violence; the subject was especially popular during the 1980s when political exiles from Latin America sought refuge in Europe and in the U.S. (Kordon et al. 1988; Scarry 1985; Stover and Nightingale 1985). In more recent years, the U.S. debates over how to define torture and the disturbing evidence of torture practices by U.S. soldiers in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay that been uncovered have kept scholarly attention on torture and its negative impacts (Conroy 2001; McCoy 2006). The interest in torture is not limited to U.S.-based academics. A few Argentine graduate students sought to work with the ex presos after I began my work with the AEPPC; they were psychology students interested in their mental health, and they were particularly focused on the psychological effects of torture and PTSD.

Psychological anthropologist Antonius Robben has found that the constant replay of memories of past violence has continued to traumatize victims and former military officials alike in Argentina (2005a; 1996). Observing and attending to the mind is extremely important because unlike physical scars, psychological ones do not necessarily fade with time. For this reason, the Western therapeutic model of the “talking cure” is applied to post-violence settings. The impetus for new governments to hold truth commissions is also to increase societal stability, because it is believed that victims will not seek vengeance once the truths are publicly spoken. Speaking the truth will heal the wounds.

Perhaps participating in truth commission in order to heal works for some of the victims who participate in truth commissions. When CONADEP formed, civil society groups and

human rights organization only had about 70 testimonies from survivors, which prompted the commission to solicit testimonies outside of the capital, namely in Bahía Blanca, Mar del Plata, and Córdoba (Crenzel 2008:182). These new testimonies revealed that survivors had been disappeared before being imprisoned and had been held in several CCDs. It also showed that those who collaborated with the military were able to recall incidents in greater detail whereas others relied upon their non-visual senses to reconstruct their memories (Crenzel 2008:182).

In Córdoba (and in other provinces), *ex presos* attend trials against former military officials, participate in the memorializing of former clandestine detention centers, and they lobby state senators to support their petition for retirement pensions. What they have not pushed for, however, is another truth commission—even though they believed it to be important in 1984. Is this because truth commissions can only be staged once? Or perhaps the memorials and new books of survivors' testimonies have effectively replaced the truth commission on a smaller scale? Furthermore, *ex presos* share their personal experiences while giving tours and in writing about their personal experiences. From a logistical and bureaucratic point of view, truth commissions require money and political effort, and may appear repetitive to the public. Yet, this latter argument has not been applied to calls for trials, reparations, and memorials, which also are expensive and time consuming—and are seen by some sectors of the public as being too excessive or impediments to moving beyond the past.

If the *ex presos* are—as some have suggested to me—secretly interested in being healed, and if the prime manner of effecting that healing is the truth commission, why weren't they interested?

I suggest that truth commissions do not capture the long-term effects experienced by *ex presos*. Truth commissions are focused on a limited set of violations that refer to the specific

time of violation and therefore assume that those violations are the most germane for the victims of state terrorism. When the AEPPC self-published its first book of testimonies, writings, and artwork, *Eslabones* (Chainlinks), in 2010, it did not focus solely, or at all, on the human rights abuses that they suffered from while they were kidnapped and imprisoned. Rather it focused on stories of humor, friendship, activism, and resistance within the prisons and in their involvement in social movements and labor unions. Truth commissions do not have as their mission a goal to portray a holistic view of ex presos; they are exclusively interested in eliciting testimonies from victims about their experiences of victimization. As Susan Slyomovics writes about the limitation of legal testimonies: “Courts and lawyers prefer to deal with texts and documents generated by witnesses but less so with deeper levels of feelings and the experience of everyday life” (2005a:79). Ex presos are interested in trials and memorialized spaces, because they can share their narratives as militants and not solely as torture victims. This chapter examines some of the long-term impacts of imprisonment that extend beyond the time that they were in prison, but that are attributed to the fact that the ex presos were imprisoned. These are the kinds of wounds that are seen to be the most detrimental to ex presos’ health and that truth commissions cannot heal them.

While the ex presos did not speak readily about torture, they did speak about the everyday social and economic impacts of having once been a prisoner. The stigmas attached to prisoners affected all areas of their life, from struggling to get hired to facing silent neighbors. In her book *Life and Words*, anthropologist Veena Das demonstrates how the violence surrounding the Partition of India in 1947 and the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 seeps into the lives of individuals and the collective in ordinary ways—long after the event. The violence of the past comes to structure the everyday. Das describes her intent to write about

violence by describing her book in this way: “[I]t narrates the lives of particular persons and communities who were deeply embedded in these events, and it describes the way that the event attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary” (2007:1). In other words, the events are the rupture and the violence that erupts becomes incorporated into the lives of individuals over time. The suffering that the ex presos spoke about in their interviews was not constrained to the time that they were imprisoned and tortured. Their imprisonment was the rupture, the event. But they spoke about the time after their release—how their ordinary lives are connected to the past violent events. The truth commission solicited testimonies of the events that were confined to their kidnapping and their imprisonment and that did not touch on their lives after they were freed. For the ex presos, perhaps paradoxically, it was during life after incarceration that they most felt the impact of what had happened to them. These kinds of long-term effects that the ex presos suffered—social, political, and economic—affected the way they are aging and necessitated a practical remedy, the government retirement pensions that they have been lobbying for.

### **The ex presos don’t speak of healing**

When the first trial against former military officials took place in Córdoba in 2008—it was the first time such a trial had taken place outside of the capital of Buenos Aires—a group of volunteer psychologists offered their services to the AEPPC members. The service was free, but the ex presos did not seek them out.<sup>58</sup> Though psychological treatment for survivors was available in Argentina following the fall of the dictatorship, the overall political environment

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<sup>58</sup> I was able to count four ex presos in the Association who did seek psychological help through a support group. Others had seen someone or participated in workshops in the past, but as a whole, the practice of seeking therapy was not common amongst the ex presos. Many noted that they had problems finding the right therapist or therapy that they felt would be beneficial.

discouraged survivors from acknowledging their suffering publicly. So strong was the social stigma of having been imprisoned that the majority of the survivors never sought help or counseling for their psychological trauma. This rejection of Western, psychoanalytic therapy—Freud’s talking cure model is a dominant form of therapy in Argentina—is particularly notable because the ex presos told me the very stories that the psychologists would have most wanted to hear. But unlike volunteer psychologists, I was not looking to help the ex presos “heal.” I was there to help preserve their memories. I was, in their eyes, helping to further their political project. Most of these ex presos had never told their stories out loud to another person before I interviewed them. I created the AEPPC’s first (and, as of this writing, only) oral history archive. In these interviews, I recorded their life histories starting from birth until the day of the interview. These recordings have become valuable since leaving the field because they are the only records of the experiences of ex presos. Since I left Argentina, three AEPPC members have died; the interviews I conducted with them are the only sources of archived materials documenting these survivors’ stories. As the AEPPC members are alarmed at the astounding number of deaths suddenly occurring around them, the need to record their stories has become even more pressing. In one case, I was told that the oral history archive interview was used to pay homage in the hometown of one of the ex presos who passed away. The ex presos want to leave behind their own personal memories of the past, but they do not tell their stories for the sake of healing. They speak up in order to shape collective memories and teach recent history from their perspective.

That they do not seek help from psychologists, however, does not mean that some ex presos would not benefit from their assistance. At weekly AEPPC meetings, one or more members would occasionally announce that they were all affected by the past and needed help.



But these declarations remained behind closed doors. Besides, these particular psychologists, well intentioned though they may have been, showed up late—the ex presos has already lived thirty years without assistance. The AEPPC, however, believes that other ex presos—specifically those *not* in the AEPPC—need free psychological counseling, and they lobby the local government to help their *compañeros* who are in worse conditions than they are. The ex presos I worked with believe that they are well enough to need receive therapy. But they are not well enough to eschew all forms of assistance, because they do believe they were affected by their imprisonment.

Ex presos face straight-forward problems, problems that do not require psychologists to diagnose. Looking back at their interviews, I gained a better sense of what the most painful experiences may have been for the ex presos—and realized that these were neither discussed nor taken into consideration when the country was shaping its transitional justice efforts. In the following sections, I will discuss the various negative impacts (internal exile, interruptions, job discrimination) that the ex presos identified in recorded interviews as the long-term affects of torture and imprisonment. Because it draws on countless hours of attentive listening to the stories of ex presos, this research is able to articulate why they are less interested in truth-telling or speaking about torture, and why their suffering should be met with pensions and memorials.

Though I have chosen to focus on specific themes, and though it might seem obvious, it should nonetheless be noted that each of the ex presos worked through the past based upon his or her own individual family experiences, success or failure in finding work, and his or her own personal responses to what happened in prison. And while the military created a systematic way of disappearing, torturing, and imprisoning (or killing) its victims, each ex presos experienced capture and detainment individually, the ordeal affected each one in unique ways after release.

However, at the same time, there are similarities in experiences and problems that are shared amongst various members of the AEPPC. Thus, what follows are stories of long-term effects that came up often, and not only in interviews but in discussions at meetings and in personal conversations. These effects have received less attention than psychological effects of torture, such as PTSD, and they merit attention because they are significant to the ex presos.

### **Internal Exile**

While the military took some people by surprise, others knew that they were being tracked. Before 1976, the police and the military were already taking hundreds captive and torturing them for information about their activities and associations with other activists. When prisoners came out of prison, the military continued to monitor them. Many of these people were taken again after the coup d'état on March 24, 1976, but this time, prisoners were held for several years or disappeared permanently. When orders were sent to the police or military to kidnap a particular person, these task groups would capture their targets or begin a national search to hunt them down. Those involved in any kind political activity and suspected that they were being followed would live underground to not only protect themselves but also their families and friends from being taken along with them. In addition, ex presos would not disclose their locations to prevent their family members from being put in a situation in which they might give away their hideout under interrogations. Living underground meant that they were living in *clandestinidad* (secrecy) and were *exilios internos* (internal exiles). The word "exile" often leads people to think about those forced to leave their country and live abroad, but thousands moved around within Argentina to avoid being kidnapped. Living in internal exile was similar to living in *exilio externo* (external exile) in that their lives were lonely, isolating, and traumatic.

Being completely socially isolated was stressful. While ex presos sought to protect themselves and their family members, this isolation created tremendous feelings of loss and paranoia, as they no longer had the social support to feel protected or the ability to trust others in new towns. Constantly moving around also made it difficult or impossible to hold a steady job, to create a stable environment for those who had children, and to maintain relationships with friends and family who, in turn, had difficulty knowing whether or not their loved one had been disappeared or not. Leading clandestine lives also created stress for family members left behind because of their not knowing what happened or what would happen to those hiding. There was no sense of permanency and individuals shed their real identities in order to avoid “falling into the hands of the military.”

*A Young Couple, a Baby, and a little Citroen: A Story of Internal Exile*

In her oral history archive interview, Alicia<sup>59</sup> spoke at length about fleeing from the military and living in internal exile. While thousands fled to the U.S., Spain, and elsewhere in Europe, thousands more moved around within Argentina. Alicia, her husband and their children lived in remote regions and uprooted themselves over and over again to escape the military each time they were discovered until the dictatorship fell in 1983. Both Alicia and her husband Manuel were pursued by the military because of their involvement in social and political movements prior to 1976.

The military deemed Alicia a subversive because of her volunteer work with a religious group that served in poor neighborhoods. After majoring in social work at university in Rosario, Alicia enrolled in a post-graduate program at a private educational institute, the *Instituto Social*

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<sup>59</sup> Alicia was imprisoned for two years because of her work in poor communities with the Third World Movement.

*Cristiano de Estudios y Acción Política* (Social Christian Institute of Study and Political Action). Most of her professors were part of the Third World Movement and Peronists, and they strongly shaped Alicia's political consciousness—even though she had previously held a negative view of Peronismo. When she was eight years old, her father had been fired in 1953 for not joining the Peronist party. During her post-graduate studies, Alicia worked in various social outreach programs in the interior parts of the country.

Through this work Alicia met Manuel, a student of psychology and a Montonero (the radical branch of the Peronist Party). Because he lived in Córdoba and she in Rosario, they traveled between their two provinces to see each other. After they were married and had their first child, Cecilia (“Ceci”), Manuel was detained in 1970 when Ceci was three months old under Onganía's dictatorship. Because Alicia was with Manuel and had participated in the religious left's activities in poor areas of the country and generally supported labor unions, she knew that she would soon become a political target. One of the most painful effects of having to live underground to avoid torture and imprisonment was her separation from her family. Because Alicia could not travel with a baby, she left Ceci behind before going into hiding in another province:

He [Manuel] was already imprisoned at Encausados in Córdoba, and I was in Tucumán. I left Ceci with her grandparents. When I went into hiding I didn't dare take her because I didn't know what was going to happen. If they killed me, what would happen to her? So I didn't want to take her. That was terrible for me, because of what I suffered. I couldn't explain it to you. How I cried about it, a three-month old baby that I had to leave behind. It's terrible, but well, it passed, it didn't pass, still hasn't come to pass today, but it's something one has to live with (Interview AS, 11/6/2008).

As explained earlier, targeted individuals cut ties with those around them to protect them.

Though it was extremely painful to be separated from her daughter, Alicia feared even more the possibility of her child being kidnapped, tortured, or made to watch her be tortured, something

that had already happened with other children. She said that she lived through it but then corrects herself, saying “it still hasn’t come to pass today,” meaning that she never really got over what happened, but that she has to take responsibility for her actions, as a committed militant.

Despite having gone to live underground, Alicia was found in August of 1971. The military held Alicia *incomunicado* (without communication). Before 1976, the term “incomunicado” essentially described the same situation as *desaparecido*—prisoners were taken without a warrant and were taken to secret prisons without any records or legal rights. Although she was kidnapped in Tucumán, which is located in the northern part of the country, the military flew Alicia to Buenos Aires, and held her in Villa Devoto. Alicia described Villa Devoto as the place, “*donde estaban concentradas todas las mujeres presas que había en el país, políticas, presas políticas; entonces nos concentraron a todas, en esa época, en el año ’71, ’72, ’73...éramos cincuenta y pico*” (where all of the women prisoners in the country were concentrated, *políticos*, political prisoners; so they concentrated everyone, in this period, in the years ’71, ’72, ’73...we were about fifty and some) (Interview AS, 11/6/2008).

After spending eight months, from August to March, in Villa Devoto, the military transferred Alicia to Rawson, the country’s highest maximum-security prison, located in the southern province of Chubut. At Rawson, two wards were created for women, and approximately 100 women were transferred there from Villa Devoto. Following a prison break in August 1972, the women prisoners were transferred back to Villa Devoto. By then Villa Devoto had changed. The large holding pen was transformed into individual cells, so that each female prisoner was placed in solitary confinement. In addition to denying the prisoners legal rights,

visits, and physical exercise, the military also prohibited the prisoners from talking (except under torture).

Alicia was eventually transferred to Córdoba where she was supposed to receive a trial, but it never materialized. Instead she was taken to Buen Pastor, a common prison for women. However, the Catholic nuns who ran the Buen Pastor refused to accept Alicia because she had been caught with a *compañero* who was considered to be *extrema peligrosidad* (“extremely dangerous”):

In Buen Pastor there had been several prison escapes, several. Well, three at least. Then when they saw the front cover of my case file, they said that with this one [Alicia was referring to herself] they [the guerrillas] would try another prison break in order to rescue her. And I wasn't—I wasn't the dangerous one in this case, but rather my *compañero* who I was taken down with—I was extremely dangerous because of him, since even the INTERPOL [International Criminal Police Organization] was searching for him. So it was him, he was dangerous, not me, let's say--he wasn't dangerous either, he was an excellent *compañero*, an excellent person, but to the military, very dangerous: He was a Montonero leader (Interview AS, 11/6/2008).

During the early 1970s and even at the beginning of the dictatorship, political groups attempted to free their leaders from prison. As a result, Alicia's having been caught with a Montonero leader made her “dangerous.” Since the nuns who ran Buen Pastor refused Alicia entry, the military instead placed her in a men's prison, Enclausados, where her husband had once been detained. The military chose Enclausados in part because they were desperate: it was two in the morning when the nuns turned Alicia away. At Enclausados, however, the military did not place her on the second floor with the other male political prisoners. Instead, they put Alicia on the ward reserved for rapists:

[I]n the rapists' ward, within what was the ward for rapists—there were about fifty rapists, there was a little room that was inside the ward. But it was a single small room, tiny like this [she draws a small rectangle around her body with her index fingers], which could only fit a mattress. And you stood in front of a filthy mattress, full of bed bugs. I'm never going to forget how disgusting it was. The door [she gestures with her hand in front of her to indicate how close she was to the door in her cell], and I had a key from the

inside. It was the little room that they used to lock someone in when some rapist among them had a problem. They punished them in that cell. They punished them in this cell. It was the punishment cell, so they put me in there alone (Interview AS, 11/6/2008).

Alicia was held there from November 1972 until her release in May 1973. After the fall of the dictatorship under General Alejandro Lanusse, Alicia and her husband were both released under President Héctor José Campora's amnesty. President Campora, who was in office between May 25 and July 13, 1973, freed all political prisoners who were detained during the dictatorial period known as the Argentine Revolution. Under the new government, Alicia and Manuel retained their political commitment, even as their imprisonment had come with a great cost to their daughter:

Ceci was very little. When we got out, she didn't know who we were. She didn't want anything to do with us. She had lived with her grandparents, and called them "grandmother", "grandfather" to her grandparents. Mom and dad, she didn't know, nor how to say "mom" and "dad." Well, she could say it but...the whole thing...When we were freed we went to see her and everyone told her, "That's your mama and your daddy." And she looked at us and hid behind her grandparents, because she didn't know us. And she didn't want to have anything to do with us. We wanted to take her with back. It was awful, she made a scene, cried, kicked. So we returned her to her grandparents. Then we decided to do a technique where we came every day to visit her. We went every day to visit her, to see her, to be with her, to feed her, to change her clothes, so that she would get to know us. It was... imagine it. It was too much. At the beginning of the coup d'état they suddenly took away the parents and she was left with her grandparents. After that we take her away from her grandparents and pass her onto parents that she doesn't know. And well, after a bit, it was over. But it was slow; it took months before we could take her with us, because she wanted nothing to do with us. Well, in the end, crying and kicking one day, we took her (Interview AS, 11/6/2008).

Alicia's experience of internal exile clearly demonstrated the toll it took on familial relationships. While Ceci was not physically harmed by the military, it was still clearly traumatic for Ceci, who had been living with her grandparents, to suddenly return to her parents after they had been away for so long. Although my intention was to ask Alicia if she had considered letting go of her activism to avoid living underground and apart from Ceci, I felt that it was rude and instead asked her if she had any fears in continuing her activism:

It never crossed my mind to have another way of life. I didn't think about it. It was normal, natural...I had no other life, other than militancy. Militancy for the sake of a very clear political project for the country, we believed that we were going to gain a lot of things but it didn't turn out that way... Yes, of course, many things were dangerous, I was running a lot of risks, but the risks I had to assume... It's like athletes who do high-risk sports, and accept that it can kill them. It was accepting that you could die, but for something much greater. At least from my point of view, it was much more important than a sport—to change the country, the entire social, economic, political structure of the country. I believe it was worth dying for this, I think today, then and now, it is worth dying for, if I have to give my life, I give it (Interview AS, 11/6/2008).

Alicia and Manuel continued their activism even though it carried high-risks because they saw themselves as doing something good for the future of their country. During the 1970s, Alicia and Manuel strongly felt that they had to act upon what they believed in—equality, socialist policies, and fair conditions for workers. To follow what they believed to be moral meant that they made choices following an inner logic; it was not as if they felt they had an actual choice between two equal options. To *not* be an activist was to also lose one's sense of right and wrong. To regret one's commitment to ideals or to a social movement is to no longer have a reason for having suffered. Thus, their suffering as ex presos in internal exile was not without a reason—it was a “suffering for” and not “merely suffering”—, they suffered for their belief in a different social and economic model that was in opposition to that of the dictatorship (cf. Throop 2010:181).

Nonetheless Alicia admitted that being separated from her family was more painful than physical torture:

More than the physical part, I suffered a lot from the separation from my daughter and my husband. It was very painful, very painful. When [Manuel] fell, I was next and my compañeros came and warned me, and they told me that I had to go underground. If I didn't go, I was going to face a kind of pain that makes you howl. Then nothing happened to you. I do not know how [I survived], there must have been some very strong psychological component in this, of a loss, of a violent fit, that was very strong, very strong. And after being away from Ceci, it was very painful for me, to not have been able to see her in all of those years. To see her after she had gotten so big, walking and talking, that she no longer recognized me, it was hard. I would say that the psychological pain was worse than anything else, the pain, the feeling of being extremely hurt, it hits you. But otherwise internally, it strengthens you a lot (Interview AS, 11/6/2008).



Although Alicia avoided imprisonment during her second period of internal exile, she expressed regret over her separation from Ceci because nothing ended up happening to her. Alicia believed that not being able to witness Ceci grow up made her suffer more than the physical torture. This was a sentiment echoed by other ex presos, that some of the most painful experiences were not actual acts of torture but the pain of losing contact with their family members while they were in prison, or of being separated from their children for so long that the children did not recognize them when they returned. Still, in reinforcing her militant identity, Alicia also stated that her experience of torture and imprisonment only made her stronger in the end.

When under Isabel Perón's presidency (1974-1976) the Triple A began killing left-wing Peronists, Alicia and Manuel were forced into internal exile once again, in 1974. In Córdoba, various labor leaders had already been imprisoned, and when her compañeros informed Alicia that she was being actively pursued again, she and Manuel moved to Mar del Plata. Manuel's uncle was a retired military officer and offered him a job at a hotel. However, when the military began killing leftists there, they moved to Uruguay.<sup>60</sup> Their position became more precarious because by then, the military had overthrown Isabel Perón on March 24, 1976 and a new, fiercer, dictatorship began.

Like others who were living underground, Alicia and Manuel moved far away from their hometowns to the most obscure towns they could find in the most remote rural areas. They concealed their pasts and assumed new identities until they had to move again. Their ability to escape on a moment's notice was only possible thanks to financial support from Alicia's parents.

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<sup>60</sup> Moving to another Latin American country did not ensure anyone's safety since all of the countries in the Southern Cone were sharing intelligence under a military operation known as Project Condor.

After their stint in Uruguay, Alicia and Manuel returned to Argentina and moved to a rural town with their second daughter Mechi and with a third child on the way. They lived next door to a police officer and his housewife. Although the police worked with the military to disappear people, Alicia and Manuel had assumed new identities that included being friendly with a police officer. Manuel explained that they had moved to the small town because he was offered a job as a beekeeper. While they held vastly different political views from their neighbors, the four of them held frequent weekend barbeques and became good friends, spending time together with their children. They created an image of themselves as simply being: “a young couple with two little kids and their little Citroen” (Interview AS, 11/6/2008).

Alicia and Manuel lived peacefully until one night, when they heard a loud, persistent knock on their front door at 1:00 in the morning:

The fright it gave us, I can't even tell you. We told ourselves that they were going to take us this time. Well, Manuel went to open the door; it was the policeman from the house next door. He came to tell us: “A search warrant arrived at the police station for both of you, and they're coming for you tomorrow and taking you to the Third Army Corps.” This guy was taking a big gamble because we had nothing in common, other than the fact that we were neighbors, good neighbors. We packed our bags, and got into the Citroen and we left without knowing where we were headed (Interview AS, 11/6/2008).

Military intelligence officers had found Alicia and Manuel again and then-General Menéndez of the Third Army Corps had dispatched orders to disappear them. The police allowed the military to conduct their death squad operations, and were therefore often notified of an impending disappearance. So when their neighbor first saw the list of names of *guerilleros* (“guerillas”), nothing immediately caught his attention--until he recognized the address of the house next door to his. He waited until his shift was over and, still wearing his uniform, he took a big risk and knocked on their door. Stories of neighbors helping survivors after their release were somewhat

common; it was far less common to hear stories of neighbors helping victims avoid being disappeared in the first place--especially when the neighbor was a police officer himself.

As soon as the policeman left, Alicia—who was pregnant—and Manuel packed as much as they could along with their two kids in their little Citroen that same night and drove until they reached Rosario, where Alicia's parents lived. Even though they were putting Alicia's parents at risk, they broke their rule because they had nowhere else to go. While in Rosario, however, someone from Alicia's childhood who now worked for the military reported seeing Alicia in her hometown to the Second Army Corps. This was the unpredictability of dictatorship-era Argentina: A policeman who found out that his next door neighbors had been living under false identities helped them to escape, and then a childhood acquaintance decides to turn the same family in.

A group of men went looking for Alicia and Manuel at her parents' house. The security forces abused and threatened her parents, trying to force them to reveal Alicia's location. Her parents claimed to know nothing, and in response, the men threatened to kill Alicia's sister. Alicia's parents refused to trade one daughter in for another. Since Alicia and Manuel were not living with her parents, Alicia had no knowledge of what had happened. The following day, her parents' neighbor called Alicia to inform her that she was being hunted. Alicia immediately dropped contact with her family and moved to a convent in Córdoba. Manuel's parents were close with the nuns and they agreed to hide Manuel and his family. By this time it was 1980, and Alicia's third child, Pablo, had been born.

Alicia and Manuel impressively escaped the same fate as the *compañeros* around them, in large part because of their well-connected families who could not only provide financial support

but social connections that allowed them to survive. Nonetheless, living in internal exile still subjected Alicia and Manuel to constant fear and stress, which inevitably affected their children:

The kids were going to school, they missed a lot of school. They changed around a lot, going, turning around, it was terrible what had happened to my children. Pablo, no, because he was the smallest, he was a year and a half, two, because he was born in '78. What had happened to us, only the kids and I know. They lived through it bravely, these persecutions, losing their home, losing their friends and their little friends, losing out on school, losing their classmates, losing their teachers, there were losses and losses, permanent ones, a lot of loss. And we were adults, and we knew why and we could handle it. They were kids, it's heavy all of this. Today the three, they are three excellent kids, the three, they're excellent from having morality, of nobility, of education. You saw Ceci, enchanting, intelligent, good kids, loved by their friends. There are times I tell you that maybe all that they suffered, also made them into good people because they suffered a lot (Interview AS, 11/6/2008).

The impermanency of their living situation took a tremendous toll on the entire family, particularly since the moves led to instability. Not only were Alicia and Manuel isolated but also so were their children, who could not establish strong friendships either. Still, Alicia asserted that her children turned out to be “good people” because they had overcome obstacles early in life. Alicia reoriented her personal suffering and her children's into a story of personal growth. Just as Alicia opined that the psychological suffering she had to endure made her stronger, she believes that her children became good people in part because they experienced several losses early in life.

When the dictatorship ended in 1983, Alicia and Manuel moved out of the convent, but remained in Córdoba. While they managed to escape from being disappeared, Alicia and Manuel had been leading a life completely detached from friends and family under false identities. When they re-entered society, they had no community. Even without military rule, they still felt persecuted; their neighbors gossiped explicitly avoided them.

## **Disruptions and missed opportunities**

Alicia's story about internal exile offers one example of how the military dictatorship caused major disruptions to people's lives. More than half of the people who were disappeared and detained during the dictatorship were in their teens or twenties, a time when they were still attending school, starting their first jobs, getting married, or having children. The torture and imprisonment that these youth endured would impact their lives over time, particularly since this oppression came at a crucial moment in their development—when they were just becoming adults. They entered camps as teens and came out in their mid- to late-twenties. Just-released prisoners had to relearn how to live outside of prison, and they needed time to overcome the years they spent in prison.

Most of the disappeared were students, and as a result of their imprisonment, their studies were effectively terminated. Both high school and university students came out of prison in terrible mental and physical conditions.<sup>61</sup> Many of the ex presos spoke about how their inability to finish their degrees also reduced their chances of obtaining jobs in professional fields. Unable to obtain advanced degrees meant reduced earning power, which would later impact them even more profoundly when they neared retirement. Furthermore, those who were imprisoned because their fields of study were considered subversive could not have returned to university even if they wanted to; there were no professors or classmates left. For many, being at school would also have reminded them of their fellow classmates who were part of student unions and were now missing.

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<sup>61</sup> Even younger children were also taken to CCDs with their parents for family sessions of torture.

In addition, even if ex presos wanted to resume their studies, it became difficult financially to continue their studies as they were now expected to support their parents. Released prisoners had to work, because their families had made multiple sacrifices to find them: many spent money to travel to the faraway prisons where their relatives were being held, others paid bribes to common prisoners who transported messages and care packages to the political prisoners. However, finding work was also a challenge. Compañeros who were imprisoned for being union members found that the labor unions no longer existed and that their old bosses refused to hire them again for fear of being associated with alleged terrorists. Instead they were forced into the informal sector, where they had to rely upon people that they knew personally prior to their imprisonment to hire them.

Disruptions were not limited to jobs and education; released prisoners found many of their personal relationships changed upon their return. Relationships with neighbors, friends, families, and spouses that were once strong were weakened, thanks to disappearances, torture, distance, time, and horrific experiences. Prior to their imprisonment, compañeros were a very important part of their social and political life, but with the dismantling of social movements and disappearances, the ex presos no longer had these activist communities either. Their social, professional, and intimate worlds were literally destroyed—each one was changed by prison, and upon their release they returned to an unfamiliar and different social world. By disappearing and detaining people, the military disrupted and irreversibly changed people's life courses. In other words, being imprisoned caused people to miss opportunities—many kinds of opportunities that cannot be easily measured. For example, disappearing couples, where one survived and the other did not, or if both survived but came out different people, changed people's lives so much so that this type of loss was the most damaging on the rest of their lives. These kinds of disruptions

receive less attention from scholars and human rights activists because they are less measurable, less predictable, and far more difficult to compensate.

Broken relationships are exemplary of how disappearances and detainment were the major disruptive event that produced long-lasting effects over a lifetime. Many couples separated after their release. Within the AEPPC, there are a few married couples but the majority were either single, living with their second partners, or widowed. Although there were many connections between ex presos, the majority of the members did not know each other prior to joining the AEPPC. Some met for the first time in prison. Through informal conversations, I heard some of the back-stories about the ex presos before they were abducted, and one particular case, dramatically illustrated the enduring effects a major disruptive event can have on individual lives. This is the story of Gladys and Petiso.

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Gladys<sup>62</sup> currently works as one of the secretaries at the Archivo and is best friends with Sara (the AEPPC president). I visited Gladys about five or six times a week to socialize and mostly talk about the AEPPC. One of the first stories I heard about Gladys was about her beauty regime in prison. Gladys used the top of a tin can—each prisoner was given a can to use as their bathroom—as a mirror while she tweezed her eyebrows in her prison cell.

Before interviewing her, I knew that Gladys was a widow and had three children. Her husband was not an ex preso, and he had died when their children were still young. I knew that while Gladys had several siblings, only she and her older brother, Roberto, were politically involved during their youth. Roberto's wife, Maria del Carmen, or "Mariela," was also politically involved. All of them were part of the Worker's Revolutionary Party (PRT). When I

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<sup>62</sup> Gladys was imprisoned for two years for being a member of the *Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores*.

interviewed Gladys, I went to the Archivo and we sat down in the library when work was particularly slow. What struck me most in Gladys' story was that she talked at length about the day she "fell"—as in to fall into the hands of the military, or *caerse*. Indeed, she spent most of the interview speaking about that specific day.

At the time Gladys was detained, she was not married and had not yet met the man she would later marry; in fact, she was about to marry someone else. Gladys had met a fellow militant, "Petiso"<sup>63</sup> (which means short), a friend of her brother's. They had fallen in love while being active in the PRT movement, and began living together. When she was 20 years old, they decided to get married. Petiso and Gladys had their wedding set for June 28, 1977, and in preparation they went to the civil registrar to file their marriage certificate. Before getting married, they also had their pre-marital blood tests to ensure that neither had any genetic or health problems. They went that morning, and planned to spend the rest of the afternoon at Roberto's house. It was June 22—six days before their wedding was supposed to take place. On their walk back, the military closed in on them:

No, we didn't get married on June 28. They detained us on the 22nd. That day we had gone to do our analysis. We had everything ready, with the date and everything to get married on the 28th day of June. I remember we were going to talk on the phone with Petiso's mom, to tell her that everything was done for the wedding. And they detained us in the street. It would have been about a quarter to seven in the afternoon. We were walking on the avenue, and all of a sudden we felt a car braking and civilians jumping out running. They put guns to our heads. They put us against the wall, and someone from the car, a woman said, "It's Petiso Novillo." And from there they drove us one to a car. They blindfolded us. They put us in different cars...From there they took me to La Perla. I entered La Perla. I remember that I saw Petiso that they put him in the stable<sup>64</sup>. It was a bigger place that I saw when they opened the door and there were a lot of detainees. They put me in another much smaller room that also had detainees. Afterward they took me to the interrogation room and asked me a couple of questions (Interview GR, 9/3/2008).

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<sup>63</sup> Petiso was imprisoned for four years for being a member of the *Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores*.

<sup>64</sup> La Perla was a military training site and they transformed the former horse stables into a holding pen for the prisoners.



Both Gladys and Petiso were detained at La Perla and soon after the military took Gladys with them to also disappear her brother Roberto and his wife, Mariela. They were all taken back to La Perla, where they were held blindfolded. Eventually, Gladys was transferred to another concentration camp, La Ribera. Later, her brother and Mariela were also transferred to La Ribera. But since all the prisoners were constantly blindfolded and were prohibited from speaking, they had to develop other ways to communicate:

I coughed so that they would realize that I was there until they [the military] took me to another room alone. They had me cross the patio. They took me to a bigger room. And I felt that there was someone else in that room. They put me there, they locked me in. Then I coughed. The other person coughed, and it was my sister-in-law. She said to me, “Gladys.” “Yes, Mariela, it’s me.” “What are you doing here?” We cried, we figured that someone was listening to us. The only thing that my sister-in-law did was cry a lot, and said to me, ‘Now, they are going to kill us. We’re not getting out of here. They are going to kill us.’ This is all she would say to me. “Let’s not talk because that’s probably why they put us together” (Interview GR, 9/3/2008).

It was not unreasonable for Mariela to think that both were going to die. Being connected to anyone was dangerous, and if the military could prove that one prisoner had links to another, such ties could be used against them. When families and compañeros were brought into camps together it was usually for the purpose of interrogation sessions, where they tortured one person to force another to speak. Or it was to increase psychological strain by forcing a spouse to watch the other being tortured, or bringing in children. Despite this, prisoners developed secret codes and used all of their senses and occasionally peeked through blindfolds to track any people that they might know in between their interrogation/torture sessions:

After they took us to a room where the detainees were, they put us on a mattress. I don’t remember of what [the mattress was made]. I knew that we were all there on the floor sitting single-file. Later I knew Petiso was brought to Camp Ribera. I don’t remember how many days. My brother was there together with Petiso in the other room because the women were in one and the men in the other at Camp Ribera. Then came the interrogators; they took you at night. Tortured compañeras—crying, pain. I remember the night that they performed a mock execution. They took us out at three in the morning.

They told us to get into formation. They told us to face the wall in the patio of La Ribera. We heard them say, 'Prepare your guns. Load your guns.' And you feel the sound of them loading their guns. And there you think of everything. It was a second, and here they kill you. They all started to laugh. They got us in single file again on that little piece of floor where we had been (Interview GR, 9/3/2008).

At no time did Gladys, or any other prisoner, have any way of knowing whether they were going to die during one of the torture sessions or in one of the mock executions. Some compañeros died under torture; some groups of prisoners never returned.

Later they took my sister-in-law one day. I heard them take my brother and Petiso also. I asked where they were and they told me to stay calm, that they had killed all three. In about 15 days my sister-in-law returned. All three returned. They had taken them to La Perla. I hadn't returned to La Perla. Them, yes. They were in La Perla for a quite a few days. I was always in La Ribera, until one good day, they called my sister-in-law and me. To the two of us, they said, 'You're going to jail' (Interview GR, 9/3/2008).

Gladys said the transfer was positive because they were being moved from La Ribera to UP1, where they would still be illegally detained but in a common prison. From UP1, Gladys would eventually be transferred to Villa Devoto. When I asked her about her release, and how she felt about her freedom, she said:

I suffered from the fact that I was out and my compañeros were still inside. My compañeros in general, in addition to my boyfriend, my brother and my sister-in-law. The compañeros—I remember that I cried a lot the day they came and told me, "You're going," when I was in Devoto. My compañeras could not say goodbye or else they would be punished. So I yelled to them that the most beautiful people I had ever known were behind bars. They didn't answer me. I loved them a lot. We were going to see each other, but I left crying. I left in a bad shape. I left behind my sister-in-law too. I left, and I went through a rough period (Interview GR, 9/3/2008).

Several compañeros reported feeling sadness, loneliness, guilt, and unhappiness when they were released because they had left behind an entire community of compañeros. The military gave no reason why certain people were freed and why at that particular time. Even three decades after the end of the military dictatorship, the ex presos still do not have any more answers than they did then. Gladys was released on her birthday, January 23, 1979.

One of her brothers had come to Buenos Aires to pick her up and bring her back to Córdoba, and the trip was terrifying for Gladys. She was frightened of being abandoned and being taken again by the military. She remembered that her brother had to use the bathroom before they got on the train and she was too frightened to be left alone and was paranoid of being kidnapped. She stood by the entrance of the men's bathroom and felt an immense amount of fear. Her loneliness did not subside, even when her family—and Petiso's family—all came and greeted her at the train station when she arrived in Córdoba. But her fear did diminish, because after one week of her release, she got on a train and traveled to La Plata, returning once again to the Buenos Aires province to visit her brother Roberto and Petiso at *Unidad 9 La Plata* [Prison Unit 9 La Plata (U9)], an all male prison. (When Gladys and Mariela left UP1 they were transferred to the women's prison Villa Devoto, while Roberto and Petiso were taken to U9.) While her family was able to get together, have fun, dance, and laugh, she could not, "I did everything to look content but I did not participate. I stayed sitting, and I didn't feel good." This depression prompted her family to look for ways to help Gladys:

One day my sister—it had been already a few months—said to me, "Nothing makes you happy. What's wrong? You spend all day being bitter." So then they started to pressure me. He started to visit me, the one who became my husband. He came searching for me, because before it was Petiso, we had been engaged. And when he knew that I had been released, he came looking for me—he knew the whole history of Petiso. And, well, we started a relationship. It was something that began because I felt bad and I didn't want to feel so lonely, but the question was to tell Petiso. I traveled to La Plata to speak to Petiso and to tell him the truth. And I could not do it because my soul had left, completely in love, until I wrote him a letter and that I knew I was doing something shitty to Petiso. But afterward, I saw that all of this happened because of the pressure of my own family. I left him several times, my husband. And he cried. I went crying to my family, I was crying by myself, and well, until we married. There Petiso was inside, but when Petiso came out, my family loved him very much. When he was freed, they organized a barbeque, it was his birthday. He asked my brother that I come, and there it was our reunion, but I went with my husband and my son. I already had a son, but when we saw each other, we ran into each other's arms, to cry, to kiss each other. And we stayed like this that day. He came and visited my family, more with me. The only thing he said to me that day was,

‘This is the son that should have been mine.’ But later it was fine. He later married “la Pacha” and formed a beautiful family (Interview GR, 9/3/2008).

I asked Gladys if she was still in contact with Petiso and she said, “Yes, he works around the corner, the Petiso Novillo.” While I had been listening to her story, I had not realized that I actually already knew her first love. I knew him as Rodolfo Novillo, and it had not clicked that Petiso was the same man. In addition, when I realized that I knew who Petiso was, I remember quickly sifting through my memories to see if I could recall having ever had perceived any kind of interaction between them. The Archivo and the municipal office for human rights were both based in the same old colonial era building. In fact, although they worked for two different organizations, they worked a mere twenty paces from each other.

Rodolfo “Petiso” Novillo is probably one of the most distinguished people I have ever met. He is short and trim, and I was not surprised to learn that he came from one of the most well-regarded Argentine families—a part of the old oligarchy. Although his family was divided politically, he described all of his siblings and his parents as being very close to one another, despite their ideological differences. Petiso is soft-spoken, an intellectual—when I met him, he was, at age 51, working toward his graduate degree in history. (He had returned to school six years earlier, in 2002.) While he had studied history and political science at university in his youth, his detainment and then his life after his release left little time and resources to continue his studies. Even without finishing his degree, he naturally looked the part of an academic, and he dressed professorially—he favored fine-gauge sweaters and button-down shirts with khakis, and usually carried a leather shoulder bag. He would occasionally make appearances at AEPPC meetings, listening and reflecting, and sharing his thoughts quietly, and only if someone sought his opinion. At the municipality, he headed the human rights office, primarily focusing on labor issues as well as social services. Because he was a historian, I often engaged him in long

discussions about Perón, Nazism, and labor movements. Petiso was not as deeply involved in the AEPPC as the other compañeros but he was always present for rallies, marches, and events that were held around human rights issues, trials, and labor disputes.

I interviewed Petiso after I found out about his past history with Gladys. I had already established independent relationships with each of them, but had never spoken about one to the other. After an hour of casual conversation, he began his story, and forty minutes into the interview, Petiso spoke about his sister who is a desaparecida. She was pregnant when she was kidnapped, and it is believed that her child is one of the 500 missing grandchildren of desaparecidos<sup>65</sup>. I mistakenly thought that his sister was the sister-in-law that Gladys mentioned in her interview:

**Petiso:** One of my sisters?

**Rebekah:** Yes. No?

**Petiso:** No, no. Her sister-in-law. We were taken together, me and Gladys. Gladys' brother, who lives in Buenos Aires now with his wife, because we all lived together, the four of us.

**Rebekah:** I heard from Gladys—I would like to hear your version—

**Petiso:** But what did she talk to you about? What did she say to you? (*Laughs*)

**Rebekah:** It was interesting, there are interviews where people talk more about their life in prison, like for example, when I talked to Sara—

**Petiso:** Sara?

**Rebekah:** Yes, Sara. She told me a lot—

**Petiso:** Ahhh.

**Rebekah:** But Gladys she told me a lot about her life before and when she was kidnapped. (*You can hear Petiso tapping his leg and saying “uh huh”*) Because a lot of people say to me—

**Petiso:** Ahhh...

**Rebekah:** You can start with 1975, but she told me everything and that you two were going to get married!

**Petiso:** Yessssss.

**Rebekah:** So, I'd like to—

**Petiso:** I was saved! I was saved! I saved myself! (*laughs*) No...

**Rebekah:** I would like to hear your story, your perspective for this oral archive.

**Petiso:** Yes... look. Yes. No, look. Ehhhh... How to explain. In this moment, eh. March 1975, let's say. I fell prisoner in a federal police prison.

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<sup>65</sup> 103 grandchildren have been identified as of this writing.

**Rebekah:** Alone?

**Petiso:** Yes, I think so. Afterward I was freed. It was a moment of change. I was in the vanguard, in this moment, I had a role in the Guevarista Youth, the PRT youth. Things were happening in the vanguard, with the family, with friends, things happened. After I left the Federal prison, in that moment, I decided I'm going. I'm going. And I went to Italy. I was there for nine months in Italy.

**Rebekah:** In what year?

**Petiso:** It was May '75 to February '76.

**Rebekah:** Did you like it?

**Petiso:** Two months before the overthrow. I was militating there in Italy, in Rome, in Florence. In solidarity as I was in Argentina (Interview RN, 9/23/2008).

For about an hour Petiso continued to talk about the social, labor, and political movements occurring not just in Argentina, but also around the world. He talked at length about the union and student uprising Cordobazo. I was not surprised by Petiso's response because in general, I had already noticed that my male interviewees often spoke about grand narratives of historical events, of which they implied they were a part, in their oral history archive interviews. The women, by contrast, invariably talked about their personal lives but within the context of personal and familial histories. Gladys traced all of the events that she and Petiso had gone through on the day of their detention. When I asked Petiso, he began by talking about his first detention after having become politically active at age sixteen. He also talked about his exile in Italy, and his return just before the last military dictatorship began in March of 1976. Petiso also joked about being saved from marrying Gladys, "¡Salvé! ¡Salvé! ¡Me salvé!" (I was saved! I was saved! I saved myself!) Later in the interview, I prompted him again to recall the day that he was detained in 1977:

**Rebekah:** You were with Gladys, no? When they took you, no?

**Petiso:** Yes, yes. But we—well. When I returned to the country, in the beginning of '76, when I met her, she was living in a house with another girl. Then came the coup. I went to another house and arrived to stay at a friend's house who was, who lived in the neighborhood close to Gladys. This friend protected me, we'd say. I stayed living there in her house. From there, I met Gladys because she was living in the neighborhood and she had a brother that lived in front—a friend of mine, Gladys' brother. So, I met Gladys.

Well, after that, it was a year and a half [voice quiets down and it's as if he is now talking to himself]. In '76, how much time was it? A year. A short period of time. One year. [Turns toward me, speaks again at his normal volume.] A year. But it was a very intense year. Very intense. That I was living there...eh...Two times...And I was with her. I went to her house to live with her. In the house we lived: me, her, her brother, her sister-in-law—the four of us engaged in activism. My father-in-law lived there. Also, another brother [of Gladys] lived there. But everyone knew us, we were in the same area, moving around, walking around. But the people [in the neighborhood] collaborated [with us]. We had lived for a year together. It was a liberal area. We got to know each other. It wasn't just a good relationship, she was in solidarity, very much in solidarity. It was a very wonderful experience having lived with Gladys there. And with a great family, I loved them a lot, I really respected them because they were very good, very much in solidarity, and playful. Ironic, with Gladys you see, well, our experience of being kidnapped. On that day, we were coming from just having gone to get our analysis done to get married.

**Rebekah:** What analysis?

**Petiso:** Blood analysis, to do a test.

**Rebekah:** Before getting married?

**Petiso:** Yes, it wasn't to prohibit getting married. Because theoretically, you were going to have relations to have children, and you did not know if you had a venereal disease, or an illness that you could transmit.

**Rebekah:** Was this common?

**Petiso:** Yeah, but it was more for prevention. I think it was for prevention. It wasn't oppressive, preventative! Well, we were coming from there when they kidnapped us, because we had passed the place exactly where the people from La Perla, the military and civilian men, were waiting for another person. That person they were waiting for was Gladys's sister-in-law, that is, Maria de Carmen, who lived with us. She had an appointment. You know, that on the other side, her appointment [the person she was supposed to meet] had fallen [been kidnapped]. The appointment had fallen. So, they arrived there to wait for Maria de Carmen or someone. I don't know who. When they came in this group, they identified me. They knew me. They knew. I was on a capture list. I had left the country and come back. For that reason, I went around with a false document. But just that day, when I left with Gladys, I grabbed it from my bag and said, 'No stop.' I left behind my false document. I went out with my real document. So I left with my real document. This helped us. Clearly, because yes, I had been walking around with a false document, and later when they jumped me at La Perla and if I was with a false document, it's like, evidence that I was continuing to walk around—

**Rebekah:** It was more suspicious—

**Petiso:** That's right. It was a little crazy to fall while carrying the real documents; it's crazy! Or at the very least, I only had the real document because I was going to get married! For that reason I went looking for it. Well, but this is speculation, you know? And the question of saving myself from getting married—

**Rebekah:** Are you serious?

**Petiso:** [Laughter] It saved me, I'm telling you, because I didn't marry Gladys. [Laughter]. After Gladys got out, she married another.

**Rebekah:** Where were you afterward?

**Petiso:** Well, they detained us; they grabbed us. They took us to La Perla. But they soon took Gladys to campo Ribera. I stayed at La Perla for a month. Thirty days in La Perla.

**Rebekah:** That's a long time.

**Petiso:** Yes, for me it was a long time. 22 of June until 22 of July in La Perla. 22 of July, they took us three: me, Gladys's brother and his wife who was also at La Perla. After, they organized us, that night they put us in the same bank as Gladys, in the house [of campo Ribera]. They took us to another. I don't know. They took us July 22 to camp Ribera. We were there until they took us to the Penitentiary Prison. We two [him and Roberto] in the male pavilion, and those two in the female pavilion. We were there until October 1978. I was there for one year in the penitentiary. In '78 we [the men] were all taken to La Plata. We were taken to La Plata and the women to Devoto. '78. Until '82. Gladys until '80, I think (Interview RN, 9/23/2008).

Unsurprisingly, Petiso's account of his detainment slightly differs from Gladys' but they do not contradict each other. There are several points of agreement, in fact, about what happened that day. They were together because they had gone to the hospital to get their blood tests done in preparation for their marriage as they had planned to have children. On their return home, the military detained them. Gladys remembered the arrest happening quickly, recalling the sound of car brakes. She remembered a woman recognizing Petiso by name. Conversely, Petiso remembered how unlucky they were to cross the path where the military was waiting, on the lookout for someone else—for Maria del Carmen. Because Petiso knew that he was being pursued, he knew that they recognized him. But he didn't tell me that they called out his name, the way Gladys remembered a woman officer calling out his name. Gladys described the events



around another male who attempted to escape but was ultimately captured, and how they were waiting around for someone else. This person was the appointment—the person Maria del Carmen was supposed to meet. Petiso focused on the death squad being there to arrest Maria del Carmen, but that the contact had already fallen first. Petiso remembered the sister-in-law as the one to be captured, and Gladys focused on the other man who was supposed to meet her.

Petiso believed that they were helped by the fact that he wasn't carrying his false documents. The military knew who he was and were able to recognize him upon sight. So, he knew that while under interrogation, if they looked at his false documents, then they would have used them as evidence that he was a subversive, since it was against the law to carry false identification. Every Argentine citizen was expected to be able to show his or her identification at all times. Petiso cannot prove that his real documents helped their situation, but he believes it to have been remarkable. He also says that it was incredible, because it was only because he was about to marry Gladys that he had his real documents on him the very day they were detained. After their meeting with the military, they were taken in separate cars.

At La Perla, arguably the worst and most notorious concentration camp in Córdoba, and one of the largest of the 610 CCDs found across the country, Gladys recalled seeing Petiso before being transferred to La Ribera. The military also tried to force her into telling them where her brother and her sister-in-law lived, and even though she refused to cooperate, they later found them anyway with Gladys in the car. When the military took Gladys with them to disappear her brother and his wife, she remembered their cruel laughter and telling her that her sister-in-law's pizza was very tasty. Roberto and Mariela had been eating pizza at home when the military came for them.

La Ribera was also a concentration camp, though smaller than La Perla. Gladys remembered seeing her brother, Maria del Carmen and Petiso at La Ribera, but also recalled their being returned to La Perla for one of the day trips of torture, which was also common. Often, after being transferred to La Ribera or UP1, the military would sometimes take their prisoners out and return them to La Perla for more interrogation sessions. Petiso, however, did not mention the mock executions and being taken to La Perla again—this is not to suggest that it didn't happen, but that he chose to focus on other events. From Gladys' perspective, it was particularly frightening because she believed that she had lost all three and that she was alone. Petiso remembered Gladys being at La Ribera while he was at La Perla for a longer period of time.

When Gladys was released in 1980, she waited for Petiso, but since many people were killed in prison and there was little certainty that she would see him again, Gladys ended up marrying another man out of family pressure. Petiso mentioned this fact in his interview—that when she was released Gladys married someone else, but he did not discuss the letter that Gladys had written to him while he was still in prison. Gladys described her deceased husband as a good man, but that she was overcome with emotion when she was reunited with Petiso after his release. Petiso married a woman named Patricia, or "Pacha," soon after his release. Pacha, a psychologist, already had two sons before marrying Petiso. He and Pacha had three daughters together. Their five children are all now in their twenties. Although Pacha, too, is an ex presa, she does not attend AEPPC meetings.

While Petiso is very happily married, his laughter and jokes were, I believe, his way of making light of something profoundly disappointing. Both of he and Gladys spoke with a lot of emotion when speaking of each other and of their relationship in their interviews. Gladys admitted in her interview that she had married her husband because she was lonely and was

pressured by her family to be happier, to be less depressed. When they were reunited, after Petiso was released, Gladys was overcome with emotion, but by then, she had already given birth to a son with her husband.

In some ways, they had a happy ending because they each survived, got married and had children—albeit not with one another. Gladys remarked that Petiso had a “beautiful family” even if they did not build one together. In 2008, they both were hard at work in the *Cabildo*, maintaining their political activities, and supporting the AEPPC. Petiso returned to university to finish his studies in history, almost three decades after he first started. Still, the military repression changed their lives: had they not been detained, they would have gotten married on June 28, 1977. Gladys now works as the secretary for the Archivo, the part of the *Cabildo* (municipal building) that once operated as a CCD, and next door, in the same large and historic chapterhouse, Petiso works in the municipal’s government office of human rights. After interviewing them both, I mentioned to a staff member while sitting in the Archivo that Petiso and Gladys had almost married, and in response, the staff member said, “Have you never noticed that Petiso comes and stops by to say ‘Hello’ to all of the staff whenever Gladys works?” I had not noticed this before, but after that day, I did. He always came by. But I never said anything.

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Anecdotally, many of the ex presos commented to me that divorce was common because people changed in prison, or that couples parted ways like in the case of Gladys and Petiso. For those involved in a relationship with a desaparecido, the relationship never had a definitive ending, because in the beginning, there was hope that a person would eventually be freed, or found. Thus, it took many years to come to terms to accept that someone had permanently disappeared; for the surviving partner there was no closure.

While observers have seen grief-stricken families continue to wait for their children to return, less attention has been paid to those in romantic relationships, perhaps because the bond seems weaker than a biological tie. Yet, for those who were dating or planning to get married, the loss seemed no less tragic for them. Sara<sup>66</sup> remembered the last time she was with her boyfriend Carlos “el Nona” D’Ambra. The military detained both of them at the Córdoba city bus station on November 20, 1976. They were on their way to visit his parents in Alta Gracia. Sara remembered her last conversation with Nona:

When they detained us it was a Saturday. I remember and they took us to camp... (pause) They put us in a military truck, that is, they were military forces, and I in this moment said to Nona... (pause). Well, he was my boyfriend, they would call him Nona [“granny”] because he was gray-haired, teaching physical education. They called him Nona because he was young, he was 23 years old, 21 when he studied physical education, and he had gray hairs. So they called him “the Nona D’Ambra.” And we got in the military truck and before they had us sit, they asked us for our documents. At that moment we didn’t have our documents and we waited about an hour there sitting and I asked Nona about the one who boarded us. “He is a military sub-lieutenant,” he told me. And I remember because he was bearded, fat, short, and spoke with a lisp. I always remember this guy, the face, and the moment that we got on, Nona said to me, “Are you going to wait for me?” Because he had said, “Don’t worry you’re going to get out quickly, but are you going to wait for me?” “Yes, my whole life, how am I not going to wait for you?” I said to him these words with vigor, in the moment of love, what do I know, without knowing that in reality it was going to be like this all my life, no? Because he became a desaparecido. And they took us to Camp Ribera (Interview SW, 9/28/2008).

While Gladys knew that Petiso was still in prison and that she had to make a decision of whether to wait for him or not, Sara ended up waiting for Nona without any such certainty. “Will you wait for me?” he asked her. “Yes, my whole life,” she responded. While it is impossible to know if Sara and Nona would have stayed together had he been freed, their relationship was cut short when they were denied even the possibility of a future together. What might Sara have

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<sup>66</sup> Sara was imprisoned for three years for being affiliated with the Communist Party. Out of 39 ex presos interviewed, only three were affiliated with the Communist Party.

pursued had the military not disappeared their political opponents like Nona? It is impossible to guess. Sara later married a labor activist, Jorge, with whom she has a daughter. When I asked her if she still missed Nona, she said:

One always thinks, no? That...(pause) Jorge, I remember that when we became a couple, in '83, after democracy returned, because one always has hope that they can appear because a colleague in physical education told me, "Sara, they said in the south, behind a lake, there are desaparecidos, that there is a prison." What do I know. Then I went and I told Emi [Nona's mother]. "No, Sara they had already told us that." And well, one always has hope, you see? That they could appear with democracy, some that, well...(pause) that had left the country for security reasons, that it was this or another. And, well, one realizes that no, not a single one will appear of the disappeared compañeros. I mean, the ones among us that were in exile, we knew who they were and, well...(pause) that there were no hidden prisons or nothing, you see? So one always had this hope, and yes the memory of this love always stays, no? For all of those who had lived in a marriage, or for the father, or for everyone, everyone. How would one never have a memory, you see? The best moments that one spends together, I mean, that one always thinks about this (Interview SW, 9/28/2008).

Sara's hope of finding Nona in the south was based on the fact that people were disappeared to unknown locations. Yet it was also easy to believe that perhaps there was one more secret concentration camp that had not yet been found; ideas like this gave families hope of finding the disappeared. Much has been written about this waiting period and the seemingly interminable mourning processes that people suffered through, without a body or a proper burial for closure (Robben 2005; Osiel 1986; Bejarano 2002; Bosco 2008). For Sara, letting go of Nona was difficult because there was no definitive closure to their relationship and when they were kidnapped she had promised to wait for him. The loss revolves around the lost potential of what Sara and Nona could have been as much as the actual physical loss of Nona. Sara continued to remember her disappeared boyfriend, Nona, even thirty years after the disappearance:

I mean one always waited, through two years of non-communication. However, he was still...(pause) he couldn't have lived even one month there [in a concentration camp], and one never knew what the situation was like, I mean, to be disappeared. One always asks, believing you could find out everything but nobody knows anything, that's what

happened with our compañeros, our families—it's terrible, no? The figure of the desaparecido, the pain that it causes, the uncertainty, the search for things that you don't know whether they happened or not, and in reality, one always keep asking, because now with the trial [in 2008], I saw people who would come up to me and ask [about Nona], "That yes, but I didn't see him, because I didn't talk to him." And well... (pause) and the person that saw him, I could not see exactly him now at the trial. But it always stays with you, the thing that happened at the last moment, no? This... (pause) are the questions, but well, one already knows that it was a transfer, after many years, it was probably a transfer, but transfers mean death (Interview SW, 9/28/2008).

Sara recalled what it was like for her and those around her to still wonder how Nona died, or if he might still be alive, or if someone was holding on to some new detail that hadn't been disclosed before. Nona disappeared with Sara in 1976, and yet during the first trial against the former military officials responsible for the deaths in Córdoba, which took place in 2008, friends, compañeros, and family members were still asking Sara for details, wondering if there was anything new to learn even three decades after.

Missed opportunities of potential lives or potential relationships are not easily measurable in terms of assessing the kinds of damage done to people's lives. Perhaps for this reason, in post-war or post-mass violence settings, the focus is on deaths—bodies can be counted--or perhaps on torture—scars can be measured. The loss of a potential future, however, is not considered to be a human rights violation to be compensated for in periods of transitional justice. The assumption that the mere survival is good enough, or is enough, falls short when considering the changes, losses, and ugly memories Sara and others continue to face and live with in the absence of their missing partners.

### **Job Loss**

It has already been mentioned above, but the inability to find work--or quality work--after being imprisoned was such a significant source of ongoing suffering that it demands further

attention. Among the members of the AEPPC, the loss of labor opportunities is the most oft-cited long-term effect of imprisonment . In Argentina’s first census of former political prisoners, conducted by the AEPPC in the Cordoba Province between 2008 and 2009, of the 550 former political prisoners surveyed, 390 had been working at the time they were detained. Fifty-nine percent of these people were either forced to quit or were fired from their jobs after their release, and only 17 percent of them received severance pay (Gobierno de la Provincia de Córdoba, Secretaria de Derechos Humanos. Sept. 28, 2009).

The reasons for unemployment are numerous. To begin with, an ex preso’s overall ability to work was constrained by the severe trauma experienced in prison. Ex presos who wanted to work faced discrimination because employers were fearful of hiring people who had been deemed subversive because; they put themselves and other employees at risk by association. Excluded from the formal sector, many ex presos were forced to work *en negro*. Literally, this phrase means “in black,” but it does not mean that the ex presos worked in black market professions; they were simply not documented workers, even though they were all Argentine citizens. In addition to formally avoiding association with a former political dissident, employers who hired ex presos to work *en negro* also did not have to pay taxes. For the workers, this meant they had no recourse if they were wronged, and it meant that they were not accruing any retirement savings.

Many of the survivors who were formerly labor organizers believe that their having to work without benefits stems from the dictatorship’s efforts to eliminate the power of labor unions. The labor movement, which could have championed for benefits, suffered severe setbacks during the period of military repression. And the overall economic position of ex presos was weakened, having been taken in their prime working years—their 20s—a period that would

end up affecting the entire courses of their lives. One ex presa, Ester, said to me, “We were so young. We were taken during the time when we were discovering who we were, when we were figuring out our careers, starting families, and developing into adults. The damage we suffered [is] because of what happened to us, at that critical age” (personal conversation, 7/20/2008).

Today, they face age discrimination. Of course there is no guaranteed path to financial stability, but many of the ex presos believe that their present-day economic situation is a direct result of the job discrimination that they faced after their release.

One concrete way in which the ex presos faced job discrimination related to whether or not one had a “certificate of good conduct,” an official document issued by the military state, that attested to one’s legitimate status to be able to hold a job. Even when prisoners were released, security forces were still watching them vigilantly. Some were forced to take courses on so-called good conduct at local police stations. When I asked the ex presos about the content of these classes, they could not recall the material because they remembered keeping their mouths shut and nodding as if they agreed, but in reality were simply submitting to them to receive their certificate and avoid going back to prison. Upon completion of these courses, ex presos could receive this certificate in order to work. As was the case in many other dictatorial regimes, the civilian bureaucracy was complicit with the military in deciding who and who would not succeed in the new political regime. What follows are the stories of two different ex presas: one was denied a certificate of good conduct; the other was awarded one. The difference that having or not having this certificate made on their lives demonstrates just how powerful the state was in determining the economic security of former political prisoners.



*A Teacher Who Couldn't Teach Anymore*

Viviana<sup>67</sup> was born in Córdoba in 1951, and was 57 years old at the time I interviewed her on August, 26, 2008. Also known as “Vivi,” (which, to an English-speaker often sounds like “Bibi”) Viviana is generally quiet and rarely speaks in AEPPC meetings, though she frequently spoke at length in our one-on-one interactions, freely doling out her strong opinions. Like most of the *compañeros*, Viviana is a constant chain smoker, and she often talks with her arms folded in front of her. Viviana is divorced from her first husband and has one son. For a long time, she took care of her mother, until her mother’s death in 2008. After her mother’s passing and, simply taking care of their house took a heavy emotional toll, and in the period immediately afterward, she tried very hard to sell the house and worked to overcome her personal loss. She lost a considerable amount of weight during this period. At the time of this research, Viviana was with another *ex preso*, “Gringo”<sup>68</sup>, and was often seen as his main supporter, particularly when he would get upset over debates in meetings. If he left in protest--which was fairly common as discussions often got heated--she would leave along with him. I enjoyed watching the two of them together, both when I would run into them at local *cafés* or when I would visit them while they worked on conducting the census of *ex presos* at the Provincial Archive of Memory. Viviana and Gringo would almost always have lively discussions, often teasing one another, but always interspersing their jibes with obvious signs of affection. Whenever Gringo would give me a hard time for not sharing the extraordinary American wealth he was certain that I had,

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<sup>67</sup> Viviana was imprisoned for 5 years and 1 month for belonging to a labor union and unionizing.

<sup>68</sup> People in Córdoba are known in Argentina for their senses of humor, and specifically for their use of nicknames. Nearly everyone in AEPPC had a nickname. One of the most common Córdoba nicknames was to call blond and blue-eyed men “Gringo,” which loosely translates to “whitey.”

Viviana—who understood quite well the true economic position of a graduate student—would just sit back and smile, knowing that Gringo was only teasing.

Viviana was arrested in 1977 for trying to unionize her co-workers at the bank where she worked. At the time, labor unions were outlawed. While her parents were Perónists, Viviana had no particular political affiliation. When she was released from prison in 1981, she faced tremendous difficulty finding new employment. According to Viviana, the military deemed her unfit and as a result, they not only denied her a certificate of good conduct but also prevented her from receiving her teaching certification.

In her interview, Viviana described the professional consequences of her detention:

Persecution... (pause) look, I was a teacher and I went to ask for my teacher's degree to be able to...(pause) Because they disqualify you for life. I came out and still the military was there. In addition to the years that I was forced to spend with them, they wanted to disqualify me as a worker, as a professional for life. I went to get the teacher's diploma because the original, for when you receive the teaching degree you get the original diploma, which at that time I was a university student. On top of working at a bank, I was a university student with two majors. And they ask you for the original [diploma] in the college, and they don't give it out again so in order to have another diploma, you would ask for a duplicate of the original. And this is worth the same as the original. When I went to ask for the teaching diploma at the school where I had received it, they tell me that I have a twin sister who had received one in the same division in the same course. And they tell me that my diploma, the file had been burned, and that my sister's diploma was still there but that mine wasn't. It had been broken into, or they don't know what happened, but it wasn't there--was the answer they gave me. So to work as a teacher, I couldn't do it, to do something good when democracy returned, which was another new kind of injury. It was another one as well when I went to ask for my old job, where I had been, and to this day they never gave it back to me (Interview VV, 8/26/2008).

While some may chalk up the loss of this document to a clerical error, the ex presos understand that it was one more way that the military punished them. Although she had earned a teaching degree prior to her imprisonment, Viviana was never able to receive her title because the military disqualified her from being able to teach. This is said to have been a common tactic under previous Argentine regimes, to enforce loyalty of workers by denying jobs to those deemed

disloyal. But it is difficult to prove that this took place during Argentina's last military dictatorship because there was no official decree announced. Rather, it simply became standard practice to fill positions with like-minded individuals, or those who supported the military.

The restriction of their ability to work is one of the chief forms of discrimination that the ex presos felt in the early years after the country's return to democracy. Even though they were no longer living in prisons, they still felt imprisoned--having had their careers shortened or restricted because of their identities as ex presos. Even when the dictatorship fell from power, those who were installed during the dictatorship in the civil sector remained in their positions.

Viviana, however, continued to pursue her career in teaching in a different province, although even there, she was not able to continue without the necessary paperwork. Fortunately, Viviana was supported by her husband, who, like most of the ex presos, was able to find work through a personal connection, but only en negro.

Well, after, in terms of the labor issue, I married another former prisoner who had gotten out in '82. And he got a job because he knew a car dealer and he gave him a job as a salesman, but a better job came up later in Rosario. With him, I was already expecting my son and we moved to Rosario from here [Córdoba], where I wanted my teaching diploma so that I could work in Rosario, because it was easy to get a job as a teacher. And since I couldn't take a copy of the diploma, I could not work in my profession. Then when I returned [to Córdoba], actually when I could work as a teacher again, I returned. I separated from my ex-husband not long after. I have very good relationship with my ex-husband. I still do and will for my entire life. He is a good father and we're like friends, it's a very good relationship but we separated for particular circumstances. Each person has his story of pain, and we fought, argued a lot, and, well, we ended up separating. But by the time I returned to Córdoba I had a teaching diploma and I started to work as a teacher. The thing that I didn't have was the master's level and there wasn't a shortage of teachers, so I didn't talk a lot about my history. Instead, I worked in an administrative office (Interview VV, 8/26/2008).

Knowing that she could be discriminated against for being a political prisoner, Viviana did not speak openly about her past in order to keep her job. In Rosario, she gained the necessary skills

that she was able to put to use when she returned to Córdoba. She began following the necessary steps to become a teacher:

To work as a teacher you first substitute. After making several substitutions for several years, you get your credentials, I think it's still like this. Or except if you choose an interim post [practicum], or you opt to substitute when you start to work or in your interim. The interim posts are all year-round, they never cut them, and the substitutions are from March to December and in between the administrative office is where a lot of teachers do their interim post (Interview VV, 8/26/2008).

However, when people learned that she was an *ex presa*, Viviana's salary was suddenly cut:

Supposedly, in January or February they did not cut my salary and it turned out that a teacher had commented that I had been detained. I don't really know what had been discussed. I request a study leave. When I return from the leave they tell me, "Well, farewell, I hope you find another substitution." "How, if mine was a practicum?" "There is no practicum," said another *compañera*, who had commented that the director of that office did not agree with former political prisoners, that I had changed my practicum for a teaching substitution, so they cut my salary. Another kind of workplace persecution, but still I kept on fighting so that I could reincorporate myself during the democratic period (Interview VV, 8/26/2008).

Even after Viviana worked in Rosario to repeat her studies to earn the basic teaching title, during her practicum, she was cut off from being able to continue because she was socially ostracized.

Even when the state did not directly intervene, one's job security was dependent on whoever was in charge and on that person's personal beliefs and political opinions toward the dictatorship and the political prisoners. Viviana did not explain how her colleagues knew, but in many other cases, neighbors or gossip often led to the outing of *ex presos*. For this reason, *ex presos* often hid their pasts and their former political affiliations in order to survive socially and economically. Her last statement, "I kept on fighting so that I could reincorporate myself during the democratic period" is an important one, because during the dictatorship, *ex presos* were rejected from society, in prison, or living underground. The return to democracy was a chance for *ex presos* to resume normal lives, but they found this transition to be more than a bit difficult.

Viviana's situation is but one illustration of how ex presos faced job discrimination and how their efforts to maintain steady employment after their release were often stymied.

After being shut out from the teaching profession and denied her old job at the bank, Viviana was eventually hired by the bank's labor union because while they could not reinstate her, they could hire her to conduct labor activities. In this new job, when Viviana worked to prevent the closing of the bank's health clinic, which was seen to be too costly, the company forced her to voluntarily retire from her position. At this point Viviana was not in the union, she was hired on a contract basis. Viviana said that despite all of the obstacles, she kept struggling to find work. She eventually got her master's degree and returned to substitute teaching for a brief period later in life. Over time, however, Viviana was not able to gain a full salary and benefits that went along with a permanent teaching position and that could have put her in a better financial position. The teachers' union is one of the most powerful and successful unions in Córdoba.

Because of her tough economic situation, Viviana was one of handful of AEPPC members elected to work on the census. Ex presos who did not have jobs, who were not in retirement, and facing financial difficulties were given first preference in filling the census work positions.

### *It's a Funny Story*

At 62, Ely<sup>69</sup> is one of the few members of the AEPPC who travels internationally. Having worked as a theatre teacher at a Jewish school for decades, she enjoys the security of retirement benefits. She is also a writer, director, and teacher of biodanza.<sup>70</sup> She is currently making two

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<sup>69</sup> Ely was imprisoned for four years for owning a subversive bookstore.

<sup>70</sup> Biodanza means "dance of life" and involves music, movement, and interactions whereby participants explore their identities and emotions. It began in Chile in 1970 as a form of

films, one of which is about the survivors of UPI, and she hopes to talk about collective memory through collective storytelling. The other film tells the story of a well-known Argentine family, the Pujadas, who were massacred by the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance (Triple A) for their leftist activities.

Born in Esperanza in the Sante Fe province, where it was once considered to be a German Swiss colony, Ely remembered her childhood fondly. She moved to the capital of Sante Fe to study film, and it was there that she said that she “discovered the world.” According to Ely, the particular film school she attended was considered the path into the Communist Party because the philosophy was to either make socially minded films or films that denounced societal ills, or produce a social documentary. For Ely, this was when she felt her “mind opened.” It was also where she met her husband Paty “El Pate” Ponze, with whom she had a daughter in 1967. And at the time, Ely did, in fact, become a member of the Communist Party and was part of student council at her film school. But later, she disagreed with the party’s politics and left. She briefly joined the Revolutionary Communist Party, but eventually left that as well. Instead Ely became sympathetic to the Revolutionary Worker’s Party (PRT) but was not a militant within the organization. Her husband was a PRT activist.

After graduation, Ely began teaching classes at the university on social practice, conducting arts and theatre with the broader community. But by 1974, the school fired her after the Ministry of National Education, a fervent (right-wing) Peronist, removed those who belonged to PRT as well as Montoneros (the leftist, revolutionary branch of the Peronist Party). Isabel Peron was in power and it was during this time that the Triple A began killing political dissidents. Ely recalled her friend, Marta, a human rights lawyer, whose dead body was found

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psychological therapy. Biodanza has helped Ely work through her experiences of torture and imprisonment.

floating in the river in her home province not long after the military abducted her. Marta's body had been beaten, burned with cigarettes, and had one breast cut off.

In 1975, Ely and her daughter decided to leave Sante Fe in order to avoid being taken by the military. Her husband accompanied her to the bus terminal and Ely begged him to come with them, but he refused, telling her that she was safe, and that they were more likely to come after him. Ely had only held public sector jobs, and for this reason, she felt in some ways protected. As the bus was pulling away from the station, she saw through her window a group of men close in on el Pate. Three days later, she found out that he had been executed.

Shortly after her husband's death, Ely returned to Sante Fe and opened a bookstore called The Elephant. On August 19, 1976, the military abducted Ely. Many activists patronized her bookstore, and a younger activist had mistakenly believed that Ely was part of an activist operation and named Ely as a subversive. Ely's daughter was left to live with a neighbor. Ely passed through three prisons and was released from Villa Devoto in the end of 1979. She came out under *libertad vigilada* (monitored release).

As part of the dictatorship's ideological regime, the military required that Ely attend classes on morality three times a week at the local police station in Alta Gracia—a small city in Córdoba Province where she was ordered to live. Ely did not recall the specific lessons; she remembered staying silent and nodding to whatever was said without giving any information or speaking. Ely described the period of controlled liberty as particularly difficult:

When I got out it didn't feel pleasurable, it wasn't good to leave. Because...(pause) what followed was so ugly. Also, *libertad vigilada* was extremely ugly as well. Because you were inside with compañeras, so everything was a process of resistance. In contrast, outside you were alone and you also knew, that they knew where you were and that they could find you at any moment (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

Ely found her life after prison, when she was supposedly “free”, to be an extension of her punishment because on the outside she was alone, having to resist the dictatorship by herself.

When I asked her if she could work, she said:

Look, lots of really, really odd things happened to me. This is to die for. (smile). About work, I said, “Well, I’m going to work as a teacher.” Eh...(pause) the first thing I did when I got to Alta Gracia was to look for a job as a domestic servant for the time being, because I had no other possibility. I mean in a week, this is what I was telling you that I really didn’t think much about it because in a week I was working, while I was imprisoned, my father died, and my mom was working as a domestic servant. My mom was taking care of my daughter. My sister was studying. So, well, I looked around, and realized that I had to work. So then...(activity) I disconnected from my mental health because we couldn’t...(pause). Poor me, on autopilot (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

Like many of her compañeros, Ely had to work, and there was an added pressure to support herself and her family because of her long absence in prison. Several ex presos felt that their imprisonment had burdened their parents emotionally and financially. And so when they were released, they immediately tried to find any job, even though most of them had only a couple of courses left to complete their university degrees. Ely remarked how she put aside the mental health difficulties she knew she was suffering from--she had just spent the past several years in prison. Ely was a single mother, her mother (who had just lost her husband) was working, and she had to take charge. In hindsight, Ely recognized the hardship she was enduring--“poor me, on autopilot”--but she ignored her mental health in order to work as a domestic servant. For Ely, as for many others, taking time to process what had happened to her in prison was not an option; as soon as she got out, she began working.

After working as a domestic servant for two months, Ely found another job putting on a theatre show at a very large restaurant. The restaurant was often filled with families, and on Sundays, with her friend (and fellow thespian) Hugo, Ely would play games, run activities, and perform. Parents ate while Ely and Hugo took charge of the children. For Ely, this was her



“*primer reencuentro con mi cosa*” (my first reencounter with my thing); it was the first time she was able to return to her passion as an artist after having been imprisoned.

Later, some neighbors found out that Ely had gone to prison. Unlike Viviana, who was socially ostracized, these neighbors helped Ely get hired as a private tutor.

After working, a woman came who had six children. I cleaned her house, then in the middle of December, the children became like mine, even asking me permission to go to the bathroom. And how did it go there... (pause) Oh, it was funny, because in the morning I cleaned the house, and then in the afternoon I would go to tutor the children. I used to say that in the morning, I entered through the service entrance, and in the afternoon, I entered the front door. In the morning I was a domestic servant, and in the afternoon, the children’s teacher. (laughter) Well, it went well because eh... the children performed very well, I prepared them in everything including math, spent a lot of time, so that... soon enough I had a lot of students, and I didn’t have to work anymore as a domestic servant (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

Social connections were very important for the ex presos to find work upon their release. Her mother had taken good care of an elderly, immobile man. This man’s daughter showed her appreciation by hiring Ely to clean her house. Although Viviana’s colleagues pushed her out of the teaching profession, her connections with the labor union brought her work. Ely found her first job as a domestic servant was also through a personal connection, and her transition to tutoring depended on the generosity of the neighbors who specifically hired her because they knew that, as an ex preso, she would have difficulty finding work.

Another factor that distinguished Ely’s experience from Viviana’s was Ely’s having received a “certificate of good conduct.” When captives were taken to prison they would be divided into those who were *recuperable* (“able to be rehabilitated”) and those who *irrecupable* (“unable to be rehabilitated”). Interestingly enough, being labeled “irrecupable” did not necessarily mean execution or disappearance—some of the so-called irredeemable prisoners survived. But the distinctions established by the military did affect how people were treated in prison, during torture sessions, and even how prisoners felt about their chances for survival.

Nonetheless, the assumption was that prisoners who were released were considered to be recuperable, that they could be re-socialized and turned into citizens that fit with the National Reorganization Process.

Hence the rehabilitation tests at local police stations that ex presos had to pass in order to earn a certificate, which served as proof of one's having been reformed. As stated before, these certificates, or the approval of the military and their allies, were very important in securing employment; ex presos without them were blacklisted. Ely recounted how, with her certificate, she was able to find work as a teacher:

When I said that I was going to work in a school, they said it was required to have a certificate of good conduct. No. This was the funniest thing in the world. I was also under PEN [*Poder Ejecutivo Nacional* or National Executive Authority] without a case. I was always under PEN without a case. I was living under libertad vigilada but I was also, was under the charge of the National Executive Authority, but they never held a lawsuit against me. I was then extremely "clean." (laughs) So in twenty days, my certificate of good conduct arrived while I was under libertad vigilada. This was craziest thing. I started to work in a school during the time I was in libertad vigilada. Can you believe this? Well, look, I was in a school...(pause) the first school I was a substitute, it was close to, let's see...(pause) what was it called, near the Sierras Park. No...(pause) behind the Sierras Park. I worked...(pause) No, I started to work as a teacher (Interview EE, 10/28/2008).

While Ely was once part of the Communist Revolutionary Party and a sympathizer of PRT, PEN had no particular charge to make against her. For this reason, Ely believes, she was able to earn her certificate of good conduct. Yet, for most of those who were imprisoned, the military never had a formal suit or a warrant for one's arrest. Since the military ran the courts and hid their files, it is difficult to identify particular conditions that allowed some former political prisoners to earn certificates of good conduct while others were denied. Other ex presos who, like Ely, had been detained without specific legal cause did not receive certificates of good conduct. Both Ely and Viviana came from middle-class backgrounds and graduated from university. Even Ely recognized the absurdity of her situation, receiving a certificate of good

conduct when she knew that she had supported the Communist Party, PRT, and held views that the military deemed subversive.

Ely continued to teach, spending most of her career at a Jewish school where she taught theatre. After retiring, Ely returned to filmmaking. For thirty years, Ely did not pursue film because she said it caused her a tremendous amount of pain after losing many of her fellow film school classmates. For Ely, she associated her involvement in the film school with her detainment, the period during which she was blindfolded. Theatre was more open and “fun.” However, living on her teacher’s pension, she returned to her original profession, even traveling to Spain to film the story of the Pujadas, who were massacred for their leftist activities during the 1970s.

On the other hand, Ely’s current involvement in the AEPPC and her filmmaking work focusing on socially progressive issues is proof that the dictatorship’s efforts to reform citizens through moral instruction ultimately failed. The certificate of good conduct required silence on the part of Ely while the military remained in power; it did not fundamentally change her. But it did, nevertheless, radically change her life. Comparing Ely to Viviana, the consequences of having been imprisoned and flagged by the military are all too apparent. The military alone could determine who was capable of becoming a productive Argentine citizen. The stories of these two women are clear illustrations of what it meant to have--and not have--a certificate of good conduct.

**Table 1**

Viviana	Ely
Age (in 2008/8/26): 57	Age (in 2008/10/28): 62
Detained in 1977, released in 1981	Detained in 1976, released in 1979 under <i>libertad vigilada</i>
Reason for detention: trying to unionize bank employees	Reason for detention: owned a subversive bookstore
Training before Detention: Teaching credential	Training before Detention: Filmmaker
Not awarded a certificate of good conduct	Awarded a certificate of good conduct
Work History Following Release: Repeated her teaching course, worked as a <b>substitute</b> until she was barred when others found out she was a former political prisoner; ODD jobs	Work History Following Release: Began working as a substitute teacher, then taught theatre at a Jewish school until her retirement
<b>NO PENSION</b> Not retired, worked on a census for the AEPPC, seeking work	<b>PENSION</b> Retired, travels internationally, owns a home

**Family Strain**

Being in prison put a strain on all familial relationships—particularly those with parents, spouses, and children. One of the most common themes of stories among families of the disappeared was the uncertainty that came along with not knowing what had happened to their children—of not knowing whether they were alive or dead. This period of silence and waiting was for many the most difficult part of the dictatorship, particularly for those whose children never resurfaced. Parents who did see their children again were, in general, supportive. They made financial sacrifices to travel and visit their child or children once they had been transferred to a legalized prison—assuming that the parent was notified of their child’s appearance either through newspaper announcements or by a recently released prisoner. Families often paid common prisoners to transmit messages to their political prisoner relatives. These limited interactions with parents were heartening but they were also painful and sources of stress,

because of the financial and emotional strain it placed on parents. Irene Martinez<sup>71</sup>, a physician and founder of a center for torture victims in Chicago, presented this pain and stress in a visual art project in which she photographed actors reenacting meetings that she had had with her parents while in prison.<sup>72</sup> While it was clear in the staged photos that her parents had suffered, the degree to which they did is nonetheless remarkable. After visiting Irene in prison, her father suffered a heart attack. Her mother, who made a separate visit to her daughter in prison, didn't appear as visibly distressed as her father had. Nevertheless, when she returned to her hotel room, Irene's mother fell down the stairs, and broke her leg. Irene believes that these were physical reactions to the difficult experience of seeing one's daughter in prison. Still, on both ends, knowing that the other side was alive—even if neither one was doing well, exactly--was an important part of daily survival for prisoners and their families.

Returning to the story of the disappearance of Sara and her boyfriend Nona, being taken to a concentration camp like La Ribera meant that there were no records or information released to notify families of where the military detained these prisoners. La Ribera was both a clandestine site as well as a common prison. Those who stayed in La Ribera for longer periods of time were able to have limited contact with their families. In Sara's case, her family found out her whereabouts from another survivor:

There was a girl who was thrown onto the same mattress as me, whose name I don't remember. I said to her, "If you are freed tell me parents that I am here in Camp Ribera with Nona." I told her the telephone number and she memorized it, because afterwards I...(pause) I remember when I went to the prison, there were a few days that we had for December 25, one visit for Christmas, and that was the only visit that year until the following Christmas the next year that I saw my parents and my siblings. I asked if they had been informed and they said yes, that a girl had called and said that "You were detained in Camp Ribera with Nona." Well...(pause) and that was...(pause) I don't

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<sup>71</sup> Irene was detained in 1977 and released in 1979 while she was a medical student in Córdoba. Amnesty International adopted her as a prisoner of conscience.

<sup>72</sup> UCLA Latin American Institute Panel, April 8, 2010, organized by author.

remember her name but really, I was utterly grateful, because being in that situation and informing my father at the factory. Because we didn't have a phone in my house, so they told my father's factory and my father answered the phone and she told him, so well, imagine that, no? The small gestures of *compañeros* (Interview SW, 8/28/2008).

Sara was lucky to have been able to let her family know where she was. Sara recalled the time when she first entered her cell at Camp Ribera:

It was a cement ramshackle bed, a tiny window, a stool, and we slept with the lights on twenty-four hours a day. So we slept with the light on and I saw as I entered the place, and I said, "I will die here." With the door closed, I was alone—I said, "Ay, here I die." I was also, on a discarded mattress without clothes, without anything, it was then that I arrived at Camp Ribera. Then I asked to go to the bathroom, and the *compañeros* told me, "No." They said, "They are not going to open the door, because they don't open the door, we all have 5 liter tins to do all of our necessities in the cell." I mean at night, they close the door after dinner and you stay like that until the next day. If you want to pee or poo you have to do inside in the tin and I started to yell because I didn't have a tin and I started to yell, "I want to go to the bathroom." I griped for I don't know how many hours so that they would open the door and let me go to the bathroom and they said to me, "Madam you are going to have to accustom yourself to being a Miss because here they don't open the door for you." I remembered this, I went to the bathroom and I returned and they locked me up again (Interview SW, 8/28/2008).

The next day, Sara learned that the other women prisoners were already internally organized within the prison, sharing news with one another, telling each other stories. They spoke to each other through the peepholes of their cells. There were three floors, and forty cells on each. Sara remembered that the prisoners could receive packages every Tuesday and Friday from their families:

I will always remember the signatures, for me my mom's signature was the most important, or my father's, it was as if was closer to them, to smell of their clothing, a handkerchief that they gave me, or a towel, or the smell of clothes, the smell of home, a perfume, or what have you, it was a different smell, or to have something that had been touched by them, for example. In that moment it was very meaningful. They valued the small things. I remember one day...the illegal newspapers arrived through the [common] prisoners. It had been one year since my grandmother had died, a few days before I fell [into the hands of the military]. She died September 8, a month before or two, and when the newspaper arrives with all of the names of my family. For me this was the most beautiful thing to read the funeral notice for my grandmother because, well, I saw that my whole family was there (Interview SW, 8/28/2008).

Being connected to families was one of the ways in which prisoners felt happiness because these packages were a way for people outside to acknowledge that their relatives being held captive were alive—and vice versa. And for Sara, having objects that smelled like her family and her home was tremendously comforting. But this is also how families ended up spending their resources, and why many former political prisoners sought jobs immediately upon their release. Even beyond packages, parents also spent their time and money hoping to see their children. While at concentration camps like La Perla, there were no visitors—the place did not officially exist—at other places where the prisoners were held, such as common prisons, some limited visitation was permitted. La Ribera operated like a concentration camp in the beginning of the dictatorship, but later on, the conditions eased with pressure from international human rights groups. But even then, as Sara said, prisoners were only permitted a visit once a year, on Christmas. After an international human rights groups visited UP1, prisoners were permitted occasional visits from family members. But the places where families visited most often were Villa Devoto and U9, because they were common prisons and those released were most likely to reveal the names of political prisoners held there. Traveling beyond one's own province, however, was expensive, as was finding a place to stay. Nonetheless, just as Irene remembered her parents visiting her at Villa Devoto, Sara remembered her father showing up outside of Camp Ribera in hopes of seeing his daughter.

And one day a compañera called me and said, “Look Sara, that car is always parked in front of the cell's view.” They had already opened the door in 1978 because the Red Cross came. Then they opened our doors and we passed contraband without them seeing us in the compañera's cell, who said, “That's your father Sara, isn't it? Because he always come and cleans his car, and cleans his car.” And I peek out and see my father cleaning the car, what emotion and anguish because she told me that he is always coming and I only saw him once. I never told my father that I had seen him once, because he gave up coming to the prison thinking—because that was the commentary that came after they looked through the window. Only the last cell was the one you could see out of, the others no, but since we were enclosed I never could see him. Only that day I saw him

cleaning the Fiat 125, a tiny car, an old one that he had bought. I got to see him—it was very emotional—it was after Christmas of 1977 and when it was '78 there were only a few months left before I saw him (Interview SW, 8/28/2008).

Even though Sara's father had a job in a factory, he still found a way to clean his car in front of the place where he knew his daughter was being held. As a member of the Communist Party, he used to take Sara and her twin sister to meetings. When Sara was abducted and interrogated by the military, they asked her about her father's Communist affiliation. Sara's father showed up both out of anguish and also out love for his daughter, trying to find a way of giving support to his daughter when he knew she was being held and tortured. But Sara remaining silent about the visits was also her way of helping her father. While this story of a father visiting his daughter may not appear dramatic, it does illustrate the worry, stress, and fear that prisoners' family members felt, and their desperation of wanting to do something. Without law, a government body, a police station, or even a priest to turn to, families had to use their own resources to reach their loved ones. And for those who were imprisoned, it pained them to see how much their imprisonment affected their families.

Several ex presos expressed guilt for having caused their parents grief and stress. Some, whose parents passed away during their imprisonment, felt that it was due to the tremendous amount of pain and stress they experienced, having a disappeared child. Others felt guilty for simply not being there when a parent died. One ex presa, Cristina Correa<sup>73</sup>, said that that the single most difficult consequence of having been imprisoned was living with the fact that she was not with her father when he died. She was in prison: *“Me afectó muchísimo que un mes antes de salir en libertad había fallecido mi padre, y bueno fue un impacto muy grande. Entonces me fui a la casa paterna a cumplir la libertad vigilada, con mi madre, y bueno, estuve*

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<sup>73</sup> Cristina was imprisoned for three years for being a part of a union.



*bien ahí. Me visitaba todas las semanas un comisario responsable.*” (What affected me most was that a month before I was freed my father passed away and, well, this impacted me greatly. Then I went to my paternal grandparents’ home to while living under *libertad vigilada*, with my mother, and well, I was okay there. He visited me every week, the assigned police captain [Interview CC, 9/11/2008].)

For some ex presos, they interpreted their parent’s death as a result of what had happened to them, exacerbating preexisting health conditions, or bringing health problems upon them through the stress and worry. It wasn’t just concern for their children that brought stress and anxiety to parents of political prisoners; the military also threatened family members, and in some cases, disappeared them simply for seeking answers about their relatives whereabouts. Even in less traumatic cases than these, many felt guilty for putting a burden on their parents—like in Sara’s case—or for failing to financially support their parents while they were imprisoned, as well as afterward when they could not obtain jobs.

In addition, parents, children, and spouses also suffered tremendously. Several scholars have focused on the 500 missing grandchildren of disappeared female prisoners, and the grandmothers’ search for them through DNA testing, in hopes of reclaiming their grandchildren, having lost their own children (Gandsman 2009; Smith 2008). These missing grandchildren were given away to military families under the logic that they would not be raised by subversives. Less is known about the impact imprisonment had on the relationship between survivors and their children. When prisoners returned to their families, their children had grown up in their absence, and they often felt that they had missed out on important parts of their children’s lives. Sometimes, children did not recognize their parents—this was the case for Alicia and Manuel--or they felt that they had been abandoned.

One of the questions included in the prompts for the oral history archive interviews was about one's reintegration into one's family after being released. (The question was posed by an *ex preso*.) This transition back into family life was, and is, a long process. Even an unborn child could experience trauma that would later affect family relationships. In the truth commission report, CONADEP reported that: "Many pregnant women were kidnapped, and in captivity they endured all kinds of suffering. Some were released and managed to have their babies either at home or in hospitals. However, both the mothers and their children suffered the sequelae of their descent into hell. These after-effects were difficult to overcome even with clinical and psychological treatment, and enormous efforts had to be made by the mother and child for them to adjust back to family and social life" (CONADEP 1984:305). The focus is here is on the latter part—the adjustment back into family and social life. I discuss two cases of fathers, rather than mothers, because most of the attention has been paid toward mothers, even though fathers also suffered. For Saco<sup>74</sup> ("Gringo"), he had to face his family's feelings of abandonment.

Well, I got a strong family. I didn't have any major problems. I had some friction with my wife because although we had gotten along before, when I fell prisoner she felt extremely alone because she didn't know how to work. She was only a housewife. She was an only child who had never learned a trade. She found one. As they say in tango, "I know you suffered more than me." I know that she suffered much more than me, because she did everything—even cleaning cars in the street. The girls would open doors, the trade of being in the streets in order to survive. Her mother helped—she was a retired, pensioned railroad worker—but she was old-fashioned and had her preferences with her granddaughters. She loved blondes more than brunettes, because I have a daughter who is dark-haired and the other is blond, because it was a mix. So it was these things, but she always had help but she had to work, she suffered a lot (Interview SE, 9/19/2008).

Saco's absence affected his family in a very tangible way. Saco's wife had previously relied upon her husband economically, but with his detention, she had to work odd jobs to financially support herself and her three daughters. Saco believed that his wife suffered more than him—

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<sup>74</sup> Saco was imprisoned for 7 years for being a Montonero.

that finding a way to support the family without him was worse for her than being in prison was for him. In addition, Saco recognized that his daughters were not equally loved by their grandmother, leading to another kind of injustice. Had Saco been there, all of his daughters would have received the same amount of attention from him. In our interview, Saco told me that when he was released, his daughters had already grown up. I asked him what impact his detention had on his daughters specifically:

The effect is in that they can't talk a lot about this subject, even today. I have tried to go more in-depth into the issue and they tell me, "Yes, but you left us alone." And they had to chew hard bread many times<sup>75</sup>. It worked out (Interview SE, 9/19/2008).

Saco's daughters felt abandoned and found it too painful to speak about their father's detention. Yet, Saco believed that in the end, they were fine. I asked Saco how old his daughters were at the time of his abduction, and he ended up speaking about how the dynamics inside the household changed:

They were ten, eight, and six. The youngest girl had the hardest time. She had to see a psychologist to overcome it. In school they behaved wonderfully—the teachers knew me, so they helped them a lot to get over it—but they suffered a lot from the absence, because I should be a good father because they loved me so much. I arrived and it was a mess because it was a festivity when I came from work. I let them play, scream, the mother would be there keeping them in place more. I arrived and chaos would break out. Then they felt good, but it cost them and this issue came at cost in the house because they suffered a lot (Interview SE, 9/19/2008).

Saco who hadn't seen his daughters in a long time spoke about his return after being released, and how his parenting style was radically different than his wife's when he came home from work. Perhaps knowing that his daughters were struggling to come to terms with his absence and then his return, Saco allowed his girls to "play" and "scream." While his daughters were happy, this attitude did not always make for an easy relationship with his wife, who was apparently much more strict.

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<sup>75</sup> To "chew hard bread many times" means that a persona has difficulty talking about something.

Part of the reason why it was difficult for children to understand a parent's absence was the inadequacy of the explanations given by both the parent and by society. Saco spoke about the misconceptions surrounding disappearances and detentions:

And the understanding of, well, was that they took you but you did things that got you taken. Because they didn't take your neighbor, or the other neighbor either, nor the one in front, as they would say to you, "I didn't do anything so nothing happened to me." This was the perception of reality in society. They said to you, "Nothing happened to me." When something did happen to this guy, they didn't realize what happened, because it happened to all of society. One was left without a job afterward. You couldn't talk much. You had to walk around with fear, since they said, "I didn't do anything so nothing happened to me." Then they look at you and, well, they took you, because you did something for them to have taken you. You are guilty of something that then left us all alone. That was that thought then, and then with time, it lessened a little (Interview SE, 9/19/2008).

The tensions that existed between Saco and his family were shaped by the way the dictatorship's crimes were commonly explained to justify why some disappeared and others did not. The neighbors surrounding the family were innocent, and that is why the military never took them—at least that is how the logic went. The belief that someone must have done something to have been taken was prevalent and Saco's daughters were not immune to this commonly held social explanation. Saco's daughters suggested that it was his fault that he left his family alone, that he was the cause of their abandonment. With time, Saco said, his family developed a better understanding, but it was a struggle:

Now I have a, my oldest daughter is an activist, she's doing things. They [the daughters] found their way with time but it was an uphill battle. It took a lot out of them. And my wife never wanted to talk ever again about politics. She was the daughter of a long-time Peronist, friend of Atilio Lopez<sup>76</sup>, who would go to lunch in their house. He was a railway worker connected to Peronism and a master blacksmith, of railways, half engineer. He had studied engineering, so he had connections the father. So she had been born into Peronism this girl, but after what had happened to me, and she was alone and how she suffered, she didn't want to know anything anymore of the M—nothing of the Monto [Montoneros], or to even speak [about Montoneros] (Interview SE, 9/19/2008).

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<sup>76</sup> Atilio Lopez was a major leader in the labor union movement.

According to Saco, his telling me that his oldest daughter is an activist signaled that even though they had trouble with his own detention, she followed in his footsteps, and it showed a level of acceptance. I often asked the ex presos why I did not see their children at the marches and they said that their kids were not interested in politics. Saco's wife, however, responded by rejecting all politics and discussions on any political topics. Despite being raised in a Peronist household that was intimately involved in the upper echelon of the labor movement, she no longer wanted any association with the Montoneros.

The dictatorship did not simply divide families through disappearances. It also created a stark line within families between members who held opposing political beliefs. One particular ex preso, Americo, was separated from his second wife but not as a direct result of his detention. His wife was connected to a military family, and since Americo was imprisoned and supported labor unions, this marriage was prohibited.

Well, I will tell you, the second wife I had, she disappeared from Córdoba when the repression came. I left, I told you about how I left, and she went with her father who was in the military. Her father was a commander in the Air Forces who was already retired. So the dad got his daughter and took her away and they disappeared from my life. I never knew anything else about her (Interview AA, 4/22/2009).

Americo's separation from his second wife may have saved her from being disappeared, but it had another effect as well. Americo's second wife was pregnant when the couple separated. She gave birth to a daughter, and Americo did not meet her until 1998:

My friend called me and said, "Hey, I have a person I want to see you." A former political prisoner who was with me in UP1 called Huguito Baso. Huguito Baso called me and said to me, "Look, I want to see you." "Well, I'm in Córdoba, come." I am cutting the story short, because if not...then he says to me, "Well, I brought a person who wants to see you." Well, I thought that it was one of those fugitives, that we haven't seen in a long time. He arrives that day to my house in car with a girl. Then I see the girl, "Hello." She introduces her, and he says, "How is your heart? Are you well?" I haven't seen this guy Hugo Baso in years. So then we were there two old guys, drinking beer, the three of us there. I thought she was his girlfriend. And he says to me, "Your heart is good?" "Look, I'm more or less good, I am under treatment." "Ah, well, but you're

good, I'm going to give you a piece of news," he tells me. "It's pretty crazy, pretty crazy." Then he tells her, "Tell him your name." And it was my daughter. When she told me her name my heart almost broke. She told me the name. I looked at her. "Are you sure about this? That you meet your daughter after 30 years?" I looked at her and said, "Why are you doing this to me?" Why are you doing this Hugo, son of a bitch?!" (laughing) And well, I can't narrate this moment, I never internalized it. I don't know what happened, my whole life story passed in a second, to see this woman...(Interview AA, 4/22/2009).

When his second wife left the country permanently, she never told their daughter about her father. When she came to Córdoba, she began asking questions, and through Hugo Baso she found Americo. She returned two days later, and they continue to write to each other but Americo said that it continues to be a very difficult process:

It's very difficult for her, very difficult for me, it hit me hard, very hard, but all of this would have been normal in our life, if the life came out like man had intended. We wanted a political change in a country, to have a better country. We didn't want them to kill us, to disappear us. Maybe she would have a father for a long time, maybe, or I mean, it wasn't us that brought about this. It was others that provoked this. But this doesn't justify it, because when someone is born, she can't control who she is born to. The ones that bring them into world are the ones responsible. So I have a big debt to my daughter that I am never going to settle. To this point, in my lifetime, I am never going to settle. And I don't know if she will understand some day, because she told me, "Why didn't you come look for me?" I had no sincere answer (Interview AA, 4/22/2009).

Americo described their reunion as being hard for both, and he emphasized how much it affected him. Although at the end, he admitted that he has no good answer to his daughter's asking why he never looked for her, he also suggested that the overall political conditions caused their separation. Had the dictatorship not disappeared and repressed the political opposition, he implied that his family would have stuck together.

Americo also described his daughter as being innocent—free from his own political guilt. That is, even if the military disagreed with him, his daughter should be seen as a free agent. Yet the dictatorship believed that the children could be saved from subversion, but only if they were taken away from their subversive parents, who were dangerous. It was for this reason that the

military stole the children of the disappeared women and gave them to their own supporters to be “properly” raised.

Americo argued that biological parents have an inherent right to their children, and that his separation from his own daughter has caused a tremendous amount of debt that he believes cannot be repaid. Americo’s daughter asked for a DNA test to prove that Americo was indeed her father. They took the DNA test, and it proved that Americo was indeed her father. When I asked Americo if he was happy about his reunion, he spoke about mourning the lost time:

Yes. (laughs) I don’t know if this has happened to another man. It is possible but I can’t tell you if I was...I think that I was very happy but with a happiness where you lack something, of having lost so much time without having seen her. She wasn’t raised in my culture, because she also has other ways of thinking, I didn’t give her values, maybe she would have better values (Interview AA, 4/22/2009).

Americo believed that his parenting could have shaped his daughter, influencing her to share his own values, other than the ones given to her by her mother and her grandfather, supporters of the military. On the other hand, she told Americo, “*No te preocupes que yo tambien soy zurda*” (Don’t worry I am also left-handed [Interview AA, 4/22/2009].) Yet Americo couldn’t help but reflect on the difference between this daughter and his other daughter, who was part of a worker’s party, who was always working as an activist. Americo felt that not only had he lost time but had also been denied the opportunity to pass on his values. Though not all parents are successful in passing their own views on to their children, for many of the ex presos, their own parents shaped their political identity, particularly those who were raised in Peronist households. While his daughter eventually learned her true identity (unlike the remaining missing grandchildren), and Americo survived (unlike his disappeared counterparts), a familial relationship was lost because of the political conflict.

## **Early Death?**

In this chapter, I have focused on consequences of simply having been targeted, imprisoned, and stigmatized to convey the ways their overall quality of life was severely diminished. Disruptions, job discrimination, and family breakdown placed an extraordinary amount of stress upon ex presos, which further contributed to the deterioration of their overall health. They were pursued as youth and held under the brutal and sick machine of the dictatorship, and then were forced to work through all of this in a society that rejected them.

The combination of prolonged stress and the particular psychological and physical consequences of torture and imprisonment has led AEPPC members to develop a lay theory about ex presos and early death. On numerous occasions, ex presos told me that they are dying early of cancer, heart problems, and poverty, and that they believe these deaths to be a direct (albeit belated) result of state terrorism. To date, no medical study has been conducted to determine if any links can be drawn between the time they spent in prison and their health problems today. Still, the connection between what the ex presos experienced in prison and afterward with negative long-term health consequences causes great concern for the AEPPC's members.

The 2008 census of the ex presos in Córdoba province solicited self-reported problems. The census found that approximately eight out of ten suffer from sicknesses or physical disorders, and three out ten had some kind of psychological illness (Gobierno de la Provincia de Córdoba, Secretaria de Derechos Humanos. Sept. 28, 2009). In addition, the majority of 324 ex presos políticos that are sick reported that their health problems stemmed from the violence they experienced under the dictatorship (Gobierno de la Provincia de Córdoba, Secretaria de Derechos Humanos. Sept. 28, 2009). This was the first census of its kind, and was seen as such a



success that it is now, at the time of this writing, being replicated by the national government, and the results are expected to be released during 2012. This broader census will help identify the kinds of assistance that ex presos across Argentina need.

In the time since I left the field, three ex presos who belonged to the AEPPC, who participated in all of its activities and who I interviewed died from chronic health diseases that their compañeros link to the trauma they experienced earlier in life. Atilio died on March 16, 2010, from heart problems; Victor passed away from lung cancer on January 3, 2011; and Luis also died of lung cancer on May 10, 2011. The number of deaths is so alarming that the AEPPC began collecting data in May 2011 of all ex presos who have recently passed away and their cause of death. Before each one died, Victor and Luis, who were diagnosed with their cancers but were unable to receive any treatment, had the time, opportunity, and energy to say goodbye to their compañeros. The surviving members of the AEPPC are now left with a fear that those around them—and perhaps they themselves—will pass away at equally early ages, and, they worry, at an increasingly rapid pace.

Today the ex presos speak about the impact of torture and imprisonments in social and economic terms, and they are outspoken about their belief that they are dying before their time. With this in mind, it becomes clearer why they do not seek healing—and particularly not the kind of healing that comes from memory projects or truth-telling. Financial reparations—in the form of pensions—, on the other hand, can provide them with material resources and healthcare that can prevent early death. While truth commissions describe metaphorical scars and generalized wounds associated with trauma, the survivors speak about concrete health problems, both physical and psychological, and the social and economic impacts that being stigmatized as ex presos had on other areas of their lives. Truth commissions put forward another version of

history that corrects the past regime's propaganda. But when it comes to the very specific maladies the ex presos see as striking them down, they do not, however, accomplish the goal of healing individuals.

In the case of the AEPPC members, I posit that the relationship between memory projects and healing is indirect. Recalling memory is not what directly results in healing, nor is it a form of therapy. But having a vehicle by which to tell their version of what happened during the last military dictatorship is part of the broader process of bringing more attention to the ex presos, and allowing them an opportunity to present themselves to the public in way that values their militant identities. As Elizabeth Jelin argues, "The markers [of memorial sites] are not memory itself, but vehicles and material supports for the subjective labors of memory, for collective action and for reaffirmation of collective identities" (2007:148). More broadly, Jelin posits that memorialization is a part of the demand for truth and justice (2007:139). The proliferation of memorialized spaces and the renewal of trials have required the presence of survivors—among them the ex presos—and with this newly privileged status, the AEPPC has been able to lobby for reparations. These reparations are what the ex presos hope will ease the stress that they are facing, and provide them with the resources to take care of the health problems that they are more likely to have, the result of a lifetime of stress. The 1984 truth commission in Argentina may have validated the human rights groups' claims that disappearances happened and the military was to blame for these deaths, but it did not attend to needs of individual survivors like the ex presos. The ex presos participate in memory work to tell their story; they have no illusion that speaking about the past will help them to live longer.

## Chapter 9

### Conclusion

Argentina—the country whose truth commission has served as a model for other post-conflict countries, a country which recently restarted the process of prosecuting its own leaders, and where significant sums of reparation money have been distributed to victims and their families—has long been an exemplar for transitional justice. Yet, despite the scholarly attention paid to both the transitional justice process and the human rights movement in Argentina, very little analytical research has been conducted on the survivors who identify themselves as *ex presos políticos*. Journalists and academics have depended heavily in their reporting of the last military dictatorship on survivor accounts, but have not addressed the marginalization of those who provided those testimonies nor have they engaged critically with the accusations that have been made against them. This dissertation increases the visibility of political prisoners and contributes to scholarship on memorials and reparations from their point of view. By so doing it has also expanded what may be deemed relevant to transitional justice issues—not just expanding the notion of victim to include political agents, but also expanding the notion of justice. What exists today could be called event-centered justice—a process that elicits narratives of particular acts so as to compensate for the harm those acts caused. This dissertation, by relying as it does on broader narratives told as life histories, draws attention to the life-long consequences of imprisonment and torture—traumatic harm that affected an individual’s family, relationships, employment opportunities, and health. The *ex presos*’ stories also expanded how we view the dictatorial period to see that people were actively resisting even during the height of repression, and even when isolated in prison.

Although Argentine survivors of the last military dictatorship were initially publicly acknowledged in the transitional justice process when they testified against the military junta leaders in 1985, they were silenced after official narratives of the past blamed them (and the military) for the violence that took place in the 1970s. Political prisoners were victimized by the military when they were kidnapped and detained illegally, and by the general public when it failed to recognize them as victims.

One of the major themes in the research surrounding the political prisoners is the uncomfortable question around their survival: Why did the military choose them and not others to live? When the political prisoners were released, the human rights community—which was made up of groups composed of the kin of the desaparecidos—did not immediately embrace them, and instead blamed them for the continued disappearance of their loved ones. Suspicion arose around the ex presos' silences in their testimonies of the events that happened in the CCDs. These silences, as the accusation goes, may have revealed the survivors' guilt in compromising the lives of others in exchange for their own survival.

I focus on this dual victimization of having been once disappeared and then later marginalized because it demonstrates that having a political identity contradicts the image of an innocent victim, and that being subjected to human rights violations is not enough to engender sympathy alone. Victimhood is as much a reflection of the political climate as it is about the actual types of treatment a person suffers. My intention in writing about the 2007 formation of the AEPPC, however, is less about arguing that ex presos should be granted victim status—though I do believe they should be—but rather about how lacking victim status deprived them of a place within the early conception of human rights among the kin-based groups in Argentina. The political prisoners featured here are part of important labor and student movements that have

a much longer history in the country than the groups that emerged during the dictatorship under the banner of human rights, but this history matters less for the new language of rights. Human rights and transitional justice are not the same thing, but transitional justice is an outgrowth of human rights. Discussions about the political commitments of the military and its opponents as well as of socioeconomic factors are what academics believe are missing from transitional justice efforts (Humphrey and Valverde 2008; Perelli 1994; LaPlante 2010). I argue that by increasing the presence of ex presos at memorialized sites and circulating their memories of their militancy, they widen the dialogue beyond specific abhorrent violations, like torture, and open discussions on political motivations behind militancy. Conversations about whether ex presos were correct in belonging to or supporting armed guerrilla organizations is still not widely debated—many feel that it is premature without recognition of ex presos as victims of state terrorism and pensions for their suffering. Doing so, however, also begs analysis for how the military and broader public responded to revolutionary calls for national liberation, and what could have taken place, instead of disappearances, to resolve political differences.

The ex presos have struggled to determine when, where, what, and how they are able to speak about the past. Having a role as tour guides with the authority to determine their own scripts in memorialized spaces allows ex presos to exert control over the types of memories that are circulated to the public about them and about their future desires. In the last decade, the ex presos have become more visible as the political context has changed in their favor, and more nuanced understandings of political actors and their motivations have looked more positively on those who participated in social movements during the last dictatorship. Still, more work needs to be done in recovering the memories of the ex presos as their participation is a recent phenomenon. There is also a sense of urgency because the ex presos are starting to pass away.

This research produced their first oral history archive, and one that has become valuable precisely because it includes recordings of interviews with Luis Acosta, Atilio Basso, and Victor Ferraro, the only recorded interviews that these three ex presos ever made. The Archivo is, as of this writing, in the process of producing a video archive of survivors, but for some of the compañeros who died before having the opportunity to record their stories, it is already too late.

The AEPPC members are invested in telling stories of resistance and solidarity because such accounts speak to their survival and reflect the way they want to teach youth about their role in recent Argentine history. These stories of resistance and solidarity reveal what Córdoba's ex preso community, in particular, contributes to national memorialization projects. Unlike the AEDD in Buenos Aires, the AEPPC seeks a direct and visible role in memorialization efforts. For the AEPPC members view their participation in memory work as a form of militancy, where as the survivors in AEDD view memorials and memorialized spaces as stepping away from political activism. Because it cannot be assumed that the national memorials in the capital accurately represent the views and histories in other parts of the country, this research contributes to knowledge of how local communities outside of the official or dominant spaces respond to and live with the legacies of past atrocities.

While most of what I have written focuses on the connections between the ex presos' identity, the changing political context, and commonly circulated memories, I have also brought attention to the economic and social discrimination that ex presos experienced since their release from prison. Even after the return to democracy, the stigma attached to dictatorship-era imprisonment severely limited their life projects and is still today negatively impacting their ability to grow old with dignity. Transitional justice efforts have focused on psychological impacts of torture and imprisonment, but this research has attempted to contribute knowledge of

the negative consequences that unfurled after the dictatorship officially ended. By writing about the long-term consequences of torture and imprisonment, I hope to bring attention to the ways that victims of human rights abuses continue to suffer over time, suffering that is not easily measurable in the largely quantitative language of state-justified or humanitarian efforts.

By describing the mundane ways that the ex presos have suffered, I set the context in which to understand why the political prisoners are demanding a new round of pensions to compensate for having undergone government-sponsored—as the previous set of reparations in the 1990s were given solely on the account of missed labor. The pensions are also in compensation for several decades of marginalization they endured in connections to their political identities. Thus, as ex presos lobby for pensions, they want to be remembered for their activism and be seen as militants. When it comes to reparations, the ex presos know that their victim status relies upon their narratives of torture. But in their roles as tour guides and recorders of history, the ex presos do not want to speak about torture. Restoring agency to the ex presos also involves allowing them to speak on their political actions within the framework of transitional justice.

Although this research is a case study based on one group of ex presos in Argentina, it has broader implications for other societies undergoing transitional justice processes. Judging by the lack of interest in reconciliation and healing among ex presos, this study makes a case for adjusting the goals of transitional justice processes to match the desires held by survivors. In this case, ex presos demand pensions in recognition of their suffering as well as alleviation for the serious social and economic consequences that came with having been imprisoned. Scholars have been remiss in interpreting call for reparations as a need for healing, particularly since it draws away from the political questions that the ex presos are interested in pursuing rather than

one of individual health concerns. In other words, ex presos do not view pensions as a palliative for the harms done to them but as official acknowledgement of the fact that they were victims of state-sanctioned violence. Healing and suffering have a place in post-violence settings, but may eclipse the survivors' desired goals for transitional justice. In addition to economic reparations, the Argentine ex presos work as a collective to circulate their version of history. Truth-telling is often done in official, state-mediated ways that draw from survivor testimonies, like in Argentina's case, but are ultimately crafted by "experts." Ex presos desire a direct interactive role with fellow citizens in circulating their memories, rather than through officially sanctioned and crafted narratives. Ex presos engage with memorialization and document their memories not as a way to relive their trauma or even to heal, but rather to express their political commitments. The question is not whether societies should recall memories of past violence but rather how, when, and where. In short, this research suggests that transitional justice processes should not be measured in terms of accomplishing healing or reconciliation, but rather by providing just financial compensation to victims who are impacted over the long term, and in offering a leading role in the construction of collective memories of the past.

Lastly, not only should the experiences of ex presos be understood by the larger political context in Argentina, but also in light of the rise of human rights internationally during the 1970s. Ex presos' experiences as visible and silenced figures in recent Argentine history reveals how human rights can be harnessed as an apolitical endeavor and can also be adopted by militant groups at different points in time. The kin-based groups reliance upon international human rights organizations to claim rights that were above the nation-state was critical in condemning the military. As the kin-based groups evolved to incorporate non-kin members, such as HIJOS, and the Association Madres de Plaza de Mayo increasingly championed radical social justice



agendas, the space for more militant views became a norm within the local human rights movement. In other words, human rights are not understood solely in relation to the dictatorial crimes but are also now perceived to be a part of labor and social struggles. These changes opened up a space of activists in general. It is within this climate that survivors began to organize. Ex presos readily accepted the aid offered by the state through offices of human rights and co-opted campaigns that sought better working conditions and efforts toward achieving economic equality. Thus, not only did the definition of what counts as a human rights issue in Argentina shift (from dictatorship to socioeconomic concerns), but so did the actors who were associated with the human rights movement (expanding from the relatives of desaparecidos to survivors and now to civil society groups). In short, human rights, the new paradigm that Argentine groups adopted when the popular struggles and revolutions in the 1970s failed, initially excluded ex presos who were members of guerilla and populist organizations. But later, human rights enabled the ex presos to organize because it became the medium for political action not only domestically but also globally. Ex presos view the AEPPC as a militant organization but they work in offices of human rights, support human rights, and adopt the language of human rights. With time, ex presos also found a way to incorporate human rights into their militancy, despite having been silenced by other human rights groups in Argentina.

The marginalization of ex presos and valorization of desaparecidos—two groups of individuals who were *compañeros* in the same kinds of organizations and movements—also demonstrates the importance of voice. The identities of those who are absent, like the desaparecidos, can be more easily manipulated because they no longer have a voice to express dissension among them and to contest the simplistic narrations of the past. Families are able to speak about the desaparecidos, who are in fact a diverse group of people, as a single, tragic

figure. Reducing any group of victims to an idealized figure falls into the trap of victim vs. perpetrator binaries that do little to teach us about making difficult moral decisions before the genocide occurs, when we are in the period before the mass violence. The dichotomized victim vs. perpetrator narrative may help identify specific individuals but can render invisible the supporting roles in the government repression, including businesses, neighbors, judges, and universities. The silencing of ex presos was not merely a factor of suspicion and condemnation, but also a result of the impossibility of easily creating one voice out of many. The AEPPC is made up about 45 members; there were between 10,000 to 12,000 political prisoners. Developing a voice for the ex presos was a challenge because having been imprisoned was not enough to draw survivors together—as most continued with their individual lives and activities in various political, social, and religious groups. The AEPPC formed because not only was the political climate different, but because political prisoners were finally experiencing similar things—the discrimination against them forged a new victim identity.

Since I left the field, the AEPPC has undergone drastic changes. During my time with the AEPPC, there was always the possibility that the organization might split into two separate groups. The reasons for the division were multiple and perceived differently by every individual, but some of the tensions revolved around political questions about the degree to which the AEPPC should have a relationship with the government. Regardless of the reason, the emergence of two factions was at times challenging for the organization to reach consensus. Still, at my farewell party, members of both sides showed up and jointly shared the festivities. While difficult for the AEPPC to conduct its work quickly and seamlessly, the divisions were an honest reflection of the diversity that exists among individual members. This dissension resists easy categorization of these ex presos and their positions on various political and social issues.

Part of the challenge in presenting a united image, besides personal disagreements, is the fact that the militant identities of ex presos have historically worked against them—making them a liability for the kin of desaparecidos seeking to present victims as innocent, or making them unsuitable for public sympathy for having been the reason for their being detained. But several decades later, it is this militant identity that makes the ex presos’ narrative a critical part of Argentina’s collective memory of the past, because it is this narrative that asks citizens of a relatively young democracy to reflect upon how their society resolves conflict. The political prisoners do not fit the innocent, apolitical image of victims that generates public sympathy, and by not doing so, they require social and political movements to gather momentum to change how the public thinks in the present about human rights, so that the past can be seen differently.

What the experiences of ex presos and the kin-based human rights groups’ efforts to carry on trials ultimately teach us is the importance of creating normative environments that do not allow human rights violations to be permissible. Kathryn Sikkink argues that Argentina, particularly because it tried its own leaders in 1985, helped set a “justice cascade” in which justice was defined by new norms:

[T]he first is the idea that the most basic violations of human rights—summary execution, torture, and disappearance—cannot be legitimate acts of state and thus must be seen as crimes committed by individuals. A second, related idea is that the individuals who commit these crimes can be, and should be, prosecuted. These seem like simple, even obvious ideas. But they run counter to centuries of beliefs about the state. It took a major movement to move such new ideas forward, embed them in law, and put them into practice. The third idea is that the accused are also bearers of rights, and deserve to have those rights protected in a fair trial (2011:13).

The Argentine human rights community and ex presos justify their work on memorials, memorialized spaces, and memory-based writings as upholding the promise of *Nunca Más*, Never Again. But such a commitment to preventing a renewal of genocidal violence requires

more than recalling memories; it calls upon the society to identify the conditions that can make disappearances possible. When asked what the best thing the government has done for the survivors in Argentina, the vast majority of the ex presos did not reply with a specific transitional justice efforts (though some did and cited the trials as the most significant initiative). Most of them simply replied, “Kirchner.” The late former President Nestor Kirchner made human rights a concern of the state and created national policies. More than the sum of the actions Kirchner took—creating memorialized spaces, reopening trials, and establishing government entities in charge of human rights—the real triumph was Kirchner’s ability to establish the normative political environment in favor of human rights.

Kirchner’s position on human rights, however, was also made possible because of the committed struggles on the part of kin-based groups and persistence of militants from the 70s in remaining engaged in political parties. Thus, the actions taken by human rights groups in addition to the efforts by various presidents in continuing the transitional justice process kept changing the limits of acceptability. The norms had changed from a period in which all legal rights were denied—the country’s constitution was suspended—to one in which the Madres became regular fixtures in official state events hosted by Kirchner, including at the events of the newly established official National Day of Memory for Truth and Justice. Normative environments that reject the possibility of disappearances are the end result of constant vigilance against state terrorism. Kirchner, then, represents the new normative environment that no longer makes it permissible for the military to take over the state when politicians fail to satisfy the citizenry, or for quasi-state entities to violate individual rights. Today, even the military supporters have begun to adopt the language of human rights to defend former military officials as political prisoners (Salvi 2011).

At the same time, the ex presos are acutely aware that their ability to organize is predicated upon having political leadership that supports their existence and in condemning the past actions of the military. It is perhaps for this reason that during this research, the Provincial Commission and Archive for Memory worked quickly and tirelessly to establish sites of memory while they had the political support. Politicians and social norms change, and human rights activists and ex presos do not take for granted that the political support they elicit now is not guaranteed in the future. The normative environment that supports human rights is the result of political struggles and must be actively maintained at all times to remain in place. Argentina's advances in transitional justice were not merely a convergence of favorable factors (the collapse of its military, for instance) but were the end result of human actions. "The political actors in Argentina faced a more conducive context for their demands after the transition to democracy, yet these groups were also more likely than some of their counterparts in other countries to perceive and create political opportunities," concluded Sikkink (2011:82)

Creating a normative environment that upholds human rights—or any other paradigm that seeks to protect an individual citizen's right to hold and express her own political beliefs—also fosters a culture in which individuals are encouraged to critically reflect and grants them the freedom to express dissent. More than anything, it is those freedoms that are absent in times of repression, and during such periods, those who witness violations are more likely to stand aside and allow such actions to continue. The right to criticize—and act upon that criticism—is what ultimately prevents rampant human rights abuses from plunging a democratic society into an era of renewed political repression.

## Epilogue

Soon after the Córdoba Provincial government passed a law awarding pensions to former political prisoners on March 24, 2012, the National Organization of Political Prisoners released a public statement on April 2, 2012 rejecting the law in disagreement over the requirements that make one eligible for the benefits. What was at first perceived to be a major triumph has since been rejected by some parts of the broader political prisoner community. The disagreement over the pension law is not merely a matter of discontented political prisoners who do not approve the law. It demonstrates that historical narratives of the past, in understanding how the conflict came to be and how it impacted people, has the power to determine other forms of transitional justice, in this case reparations.

Twenty-nine years after the dictatorship ended, and after two years of organizing and petitioning political leaders—and with the public support of other human rights groups, the political prisoners looked to be finally receiving economic compensation what they experienced as victims of state terrorism. Provincial legislator Carlos Alessandri introduced a pension law for political prisoners on March 12, 2012, and was later passed on March 24, 2012, on the National Day of Memory for Truth and Justice. This law awards a monthly pension that amounts to \$3000 pesos, which is double the minimum retirement pension in Córdoba province, and approximately US\$685 dollars. These pensions, while seen on the one hand, publicly acknowledges and compensates the suffering experienced by political prisoners, they have, on the other hand, divided the political prisoner community—legitimizing some and not others.

The controversy over this law lies in the requirements to qualify for this pension. Among some of the conditions required to qualify for the pensions, beneficiaries had to have been imprisoned for political reasons for more than a year, between March 24 1976 and

December 10, 1983, and were detained in Córdoba province. While there are other requirements that the human rights community oppose (e.g. recipients must have lived in Córdoba for at least 10 years), these conditions do not reflect how political prisoners actually experienced state terrorism. In fact, this research demonstrates the problems with all three of these conditions.

First, the length of time spent in prison did not necessarily determine post-release experiences. Even those who were detained for several months or even a week suffered torture—the impacts of simulated executions, waterboarding, and electrocution are horrifying and enduring even when it happens once—and they also experienced social and economic discrimination for being marked by the military as being a “subversive.” The long-term impacts of torture are still not widely understood, but AEPPC members believe it has shortened their life expectancies. The social stigma attached to detention—however brief—meant that people were no longer willing to associate with political prisoners, cutting off their job and social opportunities.

Counting the time spent in prison between the official start and end dates of the dictatorship overlooks how the repression actually began, and when the concentration camps were piloted. Like other cases of mass violence, the disappearances and systematic torture of victims did not suddenly happen once the military took power on March 24, 1976, but that right-wing forces had already been killing, torturing, and imprisoning political dissidents. The military expanded the number of disappearances when they took power and created more secret detention centers. It is for this reason that so many of the political prisoners interviewed here were detained in 1974 and 1975 before the start of the military dictatorship.

The new pension law also does not correspond to how the system of disappearances and imprisonment actually operated. Political prisoners were transferred to several clandestine

detention centers—decisions made by the military—and therefore spent time in more than one province. Or in some cases, political prisoners were detained in other provinces and kept in other prisons before being later transferred to Córdoba.

The initial reactions among the ex presos has varied, as former AEPPC president Sara Waitman wrote, “Some ex presos are doing activist work outside of the AEPPC, while others are doing nothing, and others only think about getting this pension law passed—there are all types. But the important thing is that the majority is happy with the law” (personal correspondence 3/12/2012). For Sara, that the AEPPC has been able to work in solidarity with other groups has been the most successful part of the process. The pension law, while imperfect, is a step in the right direction. With this as the basis of economic reparations, political prisoners can continue to lobby the government to expand its coverage.

On explaining why they reject Córdoba’s pension law in their public statement, the National Association of Political Prisoners wrote, “We do not accept this policy that serves to divide us, that forces us to break our common cause that unites us nationally and that seeks to distract us by forcing us to divide our energies on a province by province basis” (April 2, 2012). In addition, the National Association of Political Prisoners also rejects the pension laws passed in Misiones and Mendoza, which respectively provide \$900 and \$1900 pesos, and instead upholds the pension law passed by the Buenos Aires province, which provides \$3680 (Law 14042) on a monthly basis, and it distributed to all political prisoners without any distinctions.

The different pension laws passed in the various provinces have reinforced the wealth divide between the capital and the rest of the provinces. In the beginning of this research, I stated the importance of studying transitional justice processes beyond that of the capital, not in terms of the fact that the communities differ as do the memorialization efforts, but also in terms of



resources. Thus, while the pension law in the Buenos Aires province is considered to be a success, it is a partial one, considering that the rest of the country, which experienced state repression in no less egregious terms are not being compensated for on an equal basis.

## **Appendix I**

### **A Note on Methods**

In order to gain multiple perspectives on their personal experiences with state terrorism and their recovery from torture and prison, as well as their views toward the transitional justice process, I collected data from a variety of sources that included interviews, participant observation, census data, and archival documents.

### **Procedure**

After four months with the AEPPC, I began creating its first oral history archive. Only one member declined to be recorded, although I heard his entire life story over several weekend barbeques with his family. His refusal to participate in an interview had less to do with lack of trust and more to do with discomfort in speaking about the past. I interviewed all of the members of the AEPPC who regularly attended weekly meetings during my research project. That number fluctuated between 30 and 43; I interviewed 39 ex presos. Near the end of my 13 months in Córdoba, several ex preso members directed me to conduct interviews with other ex presos outside of the organization. These ex presos are also involved in the human rights movement, and thought they are not regular members of the AEPPC, they are seen as general members anyway (though they may not have voting rights). Unfortunately, time did not allow me to interview these individuals.

Each person I interviewed granted me oral and written permission to record his or her story for the purpose of establishing an oral history archive for the AEPPC, which would also be held at the Comisión y Archivo de Memoria de la Provincia de Córdoba (Commission and Archive of Memory of Córdoba Province [“el Archivo”]), as requested by the its director (and

anthropologist) Ludmila da Silva Catela. All of those interviewed also approved my use of the interviews for academic publications. In addition, I asked each interviewee twice about whether to use his or her real name. With one exception, everyone granted me permission to use real names instead of pseudonyms. I have decided to use their names in general and, when applicable, the nicknames used by the ex presos for each other. Three ex presos did not grant permission to release a copy to the AEPPC and the Archivo because of personal conflicts with the other ex presos. However, these three also said that their real names should be used in publication and did not oppose my using and presenting their interviews for academic purposes. Each participant was also given a digital copy of his or her interview and given the opportunity to suppress any part of the interview if he or she desired.

## **Participants**

Since I became a regular presence in the AEPPC, I was able to easily interact with ex presos both informally (in casual, social settings) and formally (in recorded interviews). While I met many other ex presos from different provinces at national conferences, I limited my scope and number of interviews to focus on developing strong relationships within the city of Córdoba. I did, however, attempt to speak with ex presos living in Córdoba Province who are not in the AEPPC, but was ultimately unsuccessful. These people were uninterested in joining the organization and were just as reluctant to speak with me about the past. (One such person was an ex presa who owned the apartment I rented.) This project concentrates on the ex presos interested in organizing and continuing their political activism, and does not represent the community of survivors as a whole. Estimates count between 10,000 to 20,000 political prisoners during the last military dictatorship (1976-1983). In the 2008-2009 census of political prisoners in Córdoba,

550 political prisoners voluntarily registered. There were approximately 40 regularly attending members in the AEPPC when I conducted my study. This dissertation is based off of the views of the AEPPC members, and not on the whole community of self-identified political prisoners.

In addition to my interviews with ex presos, I also interviewed three individuals in Buenos Aires who were directly involved in shaping the country in the post-dictatorial period in governmental, non-governmental, and grassroots spheres of the human rights movement. These individuals were Jaime Malamud-Goti, one of the two chief architects of the 1984 Truth Commission and 1985 Trial of the Juntas; Ana María Careaga, director of Institute of Space for Memory in Buenos Aires (and an ex presa); and Hugo Argente, a leading member of the Relatives of the Desaparecidos and the Detained for Political Reasons in Buenos Aires (and an ex preso).

I also spoke with two other leaders in the human rights community in Córdoba who were recommended to me by the ex presos, who added further insights to my research: Ludmila da Silva Catela, director of the Provincial Archive and Commission of Memory in Córdoba and Juan Villa, director of the Committee on the Consequences of State Terrorism in the Secretary of Human Rights in Province of Córdoba. These interviews provided me with a history of transitional justice, information on current efforts to help ex presos, and expert knowledge on memorializing efforts.

### **Oral History Archive Interviews**

I also created AEPPC's first oral history archive. Before conducting the interviews, which inform this research, I solicited questions from the members. The questions they submitted revolved around their experiences before and after their detention, specifically, their

reintegration into the family and community life, and the types of struggles they faced when they were released from prison, including discrimination, employment, political membership, and health issues. The interviews ranged in duration from 15 minutes to 3.5 hours.

I approached each semi-structured interview as a friendly conversation (Spradley 1979:55-58), and in each one I was able to systematically categorize my qualitative data. Structurally, the interviews documented life events in chronological order, starting with an ex preso's birthplace and basic biographical information:

- *¿Cual es tu nombre?* – What is your name?
- *¿Cuántos años tienes?* – How old are you?
- *¿Estas casado?* – Are you married?
- *¿Tienes hijos?* – Do you have children?
- *¿Dónde naciste?* – Where were you born?
- *¿A que te dedicas?* – What is your profession?

With the basics covered, AEPPC members wrote the next eight questions that pushed the interview along. After conducting the first two interviews, I realized that the AEPPC should take the lead on the content of its oral history archive. Thus, at a group meeting, I circulated a piece of paper and invited every member a chance to write a question. This method of soliciting questions had the added benefit of making the submissions anonymous as well. I also felt that if the questions came from the ex presos themselves, I could ask them in a more forward manner (and would have a greater likelihood of getting the answers to each one). Their questions, furthermore, would reveal what information the ex presos themselves believed to be important. Before conducting interviews, I also reminded each person that after I solicited biographical information that the first eight questions came from the AEPPC members, and showed them the list of questions in print before recording. These were the first eight questions:

- 1) *¿Qué hacías (desglosar aspectos diferentes) antes del (secuestro, detención, etc.)?* What were you doing (separate different aspects) before the (kidnapping, detention, etc.)?

- 2) *¿Dónde fuiste secuestrada?* Where were you kidnapped?
- 3) *¿Qué aspecto del recorte democrático (social, sindical, empresario, estudiantil) afectó al compañero?* What aspect of the cutback in democracy (social, syndicate, business, student) affected the compañero?
- 4) *¿Qué consecuencias sufriste (¡ya sea psicológicas, laborales, sociales, etc.!) luego de detención o secuestro? ¿Cómo fue la inserción en el núcleo familiar?* What consequences did you suffer (obviously psychologically, employment-wise, social, etc.!) after the detention or kidnapping? How was the integration back into the nuclear family?
- 5) *¿Cómo fue la inserción en la sociedad después de tu salida?* How was the integration into society after your release?
- 6) *¿Cuánto tiempo estuvo desocupada, sin trabajo? ¿De que vivías con tu familia?* For how long were you unemployed, without work? How did you support your family?
- 7) *¿Cómo te sentiste al ser liberado/a, ¿comprendido? ¿discriminado?* How did you feel after you were freed? Understood? Discriminated?
- 8) *¿Tu personalidad siguió siendo la misma, antes y después de tu secuestro o Privación de la libertad? ¿Qué es lo que cambió?* Did your personality continue to be the same, before and after your kidnapping or incarceration? What was it that changed?

In addition to these questions, I added five additional ones to collect their perspectives on memorialized spaces, trials, and reparations. I was also interested in soliciting individual narrations of the history of the AEPPC—including each one's experience of becoming a member.

- 1) *¿Visitaste los espacios donde fuiste secuestrada o otros espacios de la memoria?* Have you visited the places where you were detained or other spaces of memory?
- 2) *¿Ya fuiste un testigo para los juicios o contaste tus testimonios a otros? Como has sido tu experiencia como un testigo?* Did you ever serve as a witness for any trials or told your testimony to others? What has been your experience as a witness?
- 3) *¿En cual grupo participó en el pasado? ¿Todavía existe? ¿Que aprendiste de tu militancia—como los éxitos y fracasos?* In which group were you a part of in the past? Does it still exist? What did you learn from your activism—such as successes and failures?

- 4) *¿Qué es la historia de la Asociación de los ex preso políticos de Córdoba? Cuando empezó? ¿Cómo supiste sobre la Asociación? Que haces para la asociación? ¿Trabajas por el censo? (Sí - ¿Puedes explicar el motivo del censo?)* What is the history of the Association of Former Political Prisoners of Córdoba? When did it start? How did you learn about the AEPPC? What do you do for the AEPPC today? Are you working for the census? If you do, can you explain the purpose of the census?
- 5) *¿Desde 1985, en tu opinión, que es la cosa mas importante que el gobierno o otros grupos han hecho para los sobrevivientes del terrorismo del estado?* Since 1985, in your opinion, what is the important thing that the government or any other group has done for the survivors of state terrorism?

In the first handful of interviews, I referred to the list of questions to guide the interviews. However, with time, I was able to conduct the interviews with minimal intervention, discuss beforehand the kinds of information I sought before turning the recorder on, and facilitate the narrative to produce all of the answers without having to explicitly ask, by directing the conversations more subtly. Some interviewees wanted me to prompt them with questions rather than direct the interview themselves, while other individuals would speak at length on topics of their choosing, leaving me to find ways to guide the person back to the topic at hand. I allowed each interview to take its own course, but I made sure to cover the above questions in order to record data thematically during my analysis. Only in a few cases did I need to solicit additional answers outside of the recorded interview.

Copies of the recording of these interviews were given to each ex preso as well as an entire set to the AEPPC, which is located in the group's new *casa* (home), which opened in November 2010. After publishing this research, recording of these interviews will be made available to the public through the Provincial Commission and Archive of Memory in Córdoba.

In addition to the formally recorded interviews, I also consulted with members of other local human rights groups, scholars, and lawyers, as well as with the friends and family members of those involved in the human rights community or in the labor movement. While these

conversations are not formally cited in this research, they shaped my overall knowledge of the dictatorship, the city of Córdoba, the human rights community, Argentine politics and history, and ex presos.

## **Participant Observation**

### *The AEPPC Weekly Meetings*

The richest observations of the ex presos took place at weekly AEPPC meetings. Because of the trial against former General Menéndez, the ex presos gathered every week to ensure their presence at the trial, to strategize publicity, and to serve as a support group for one another and for other ex presos. Saturday meetings began at 10am or 11am and lasted the entire day; the entire duration was spent sitting in chairs. Unless someone was explicitly invited to present a proposal or provide a report, these meetings were closed to the public. Among the 30 to 40 members present, we shared one maté (a grass drink popular in Argentina and frequently served with sugar in Córdoba) and passed around sugary pastries or hard candy.

The ex presos discussed the most pressing issues affecting the group's members (health problems, for instance), official political positions on issues and events in which they were involved, the process of choosing and executing memory-related education projects, and their progress toward creating a national movement of ex presos to lobby the government for pensions. At meetings members would regularly update each other on trials all throughout the country, on the status of other ex presos who required assistance, and on the various sub-committees, which include fundraising, a documentary film project on the prison called UP1, and editing a book of testimonies. This last subcommittee successfully published the collection of testimonies, *Eslabones*, in 2009. Meetings ended around 9:30pm or 10:00pm, and afterward we



often went to a nearby café for pizza, beer, or coffee. Often, the *compañeros* would tell stories from their time in prison, or report on fellow survivors experiencing severe PTSD and other mental or physical illnesses. These conversations were not formally recorded but I learned a tremendous amount about daily survival in prison and the various forms of psychological torture that the *ex presos* experienced.

### *Other Observed Spaces*

Ethnographic analyses depend upon an observer's knowledge of the multiple and layered meanings behind remarks, events and other happenings, and such knowledge can only come from extensive participation in the activities of the particular community (Crane and Angrosino 1984:70). I attended a wide range of activities to broaden my exposure to the *ex presos'* general activities, and the activities of other human rights groups and scholars. Beyond the AEPPC and sub-committee meetings, I attended colloquia, public lectures, workshops, art exhibitions, tours, conferences, rallies, and trial sessions in Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Santiago del Estero, and Montevideo in Uruguay. I visited the following "Spaces for Memory" in Córdoba: D2 – Archivo and D2 – Mariano Moreno (the two former locations of the center of police intelligence), La Perla (the second largest concentration camp in Argentina); in Buenos Aires: ex-ESMA (the former Naval Academy and largest concentration camp), Parque de la Memoria (Memory Park), El Monumento para las víctimas del terrorismo de estado (The Monument for Victims of State Terrorism), and Club Atlético (a concentration camp in Buenos Aires); and in Santiago del Estero: a memorial honoring former ERP members killed by the military after a failed guerrilla operation.

I spent the majority of my time socializing with various ex presos in cafes, the Archive, the office of Familiares, the Secretary of Human Rights, or in their homes. My weekends were frequently spent with ex presos as I was often invited to their homes for *asados* (Argentine barbeques) where large amounts of salted, grilled beef were served over a period of four or five hours.

### **Census Data**

This research is also informed by Argentina's first census of ex presos, which took place in the Córdoba province as a joint initiative by the Secretary of Human Rights of the Córdoba Province and the AEPPC. This census was a pilot project, and it was later adopted and expanded into a national census based out of Buenos Aires. Most of the AEPPC members conducted the voluntary registry after receiving training from local government workers in statistics and on how to conduct a survey. I also sat in on this training session to gain a clearer understanding of the survey questions and to learn about potential obstacles. Observing all three locations where the census was conducted, I witnessed the ex presos from the AEPPC easily build rapport with other ex presos while conducting the survey because of their shared experience of being imprisoned. They sometimes ended up acting as impromptu social workers by listening to stories from people who had never spoken about their detainment, and directing them toward social services, such as counseling. The results of this census provided a general picture of the economic and health conditions of the 550 ex presos identified across Córdoba province.

### **Archival Documentation**

Prior to my arrival in Argentina, I conducted research at The National Security Archive at George Washington University on declassified documents from the U.S. Embassy in Argentina during the last military dictatorship and at The National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland on declassified documents pertaining to the Argentine dictatorship between the years 1976 to 1983. I specifically searched for reports demonstrating that the U.S. Embassy was aware of crimes committed during the dictatorship, listing any statistics on the number of disappearances, and documenting any mention of planned interventions to free political prisoners. I ended up mostly with copies of diplomatic cables between the U.S. ambassador in Argentina and Washington, D.C.

In Buenos Aires, at the *Centro Estudios Legales y Sociales* (Center of Social and Legal Studies [CELS]), I photographed pages from archived newspapers, books, journals, poems, pamphlets from Argentine human rights groups, and reports by international human rights organizations about human rights violations. At the *Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social* (Institute of Economic and Social Development [IDES]), also located in Buenos Aires, I photocopied relevant essays and chapters from Spanish-language books and academic journals that examined memory, disappearance, memorials, and archives, including the journal *Puentes* and a published series of nine volumes on memory in the Southern Cone between 2002-2005: Jelin 2002; Feld 2002; Jelin 2002, Da Silva Catela and Jelin 2002; Jelin and Langland 2003; Pino and Jelin 2004; Jelin and Lorenz 2004; Cruz 2004; Jelin and Longoni 2005; Hershberg and Aguero 2005.

In Córdoba, I spent at least three days a week at the Archivo, where the archival materials and library collection was either constantly changing or expanding. I photographed the actual archive space because it is also one of the sites of where the police intelligence operated and

where thousands of detainees passed through before being transferred to other concentration camps. I attended all of the special exhibitions between May 2008 and June 2009 at the Archivo, which featured archival objects, such as pieces of clothing of some of the disappeared victims. I would often consult the magazines, books, essays, and diaries in the Archivo's library.

In addition, as part of a local project for the Archivo, I accompanied one of the librarians (an ex preso Juan Carlos) to the Provincial Newspaper Archive of Córdoba to photograph newspaper articles that reported on "confrontations" between "subversives" and the government in 1975 and 1976. Juan Carlos instructed me to request copies of the local newspaper *La Voz del Interior* between the months March and October of each year because the period between November and February is when Argentines go on vacation. He explained that during the summer time, even the military took a break when the temperature rose and the holidays took precedence.

The final source of archival materials comes from the published collection of testimonial texts *Eslabones*, (2009) published by the AEPPC. *Eslabones* contains personal accounts, stories, testimonies, poetry, and artwork by ex presos from Córdoba Province. These writings and pictures provide additional data on the experience of imprisonment for ex presos.

## **Data Analysis**

While in Argentina, I conducted the first cycle of data analysis and on more than a few occasions, I returned to collect additional or different data with revised questions, reflections, and new goals.<sup>77</sup> In other words, I was engaged in a constant cycle of data collection, analysis,

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<sup>77</sup> I would like to thank my former professor Els van Dongen took a sincere interest in my work and with whom I exchanged several emails during the first few months of my fieldwork research

and reflection that kept repeating until I reached “saturation point.”

In coding my fieldnotes, I adopted an analytic process outlined by Howard Becker (1958) that involved four stages in turning participant observation into an analytic process. I began by choosing concepts/ideas (healing, memory, torture, health, militancy, etc.) and problems (what do survivors want today from the government? How do memorials, justice trials, and reparations configure into their key goals as members of the AEPPC?) Then, I noted the concepts that repeated throughout and grouped these concepts under a larger theme. I also made connections between different observations described throughout my fieldnotes. In this way, I was doing both open coding and focused coding (Emerson et al. 1995:143). While the census data provides quantitative data of a larger representative sample, my interviews, fieldnotes, and participant observation offer a rich, in-depth understanding of the subject and document attitudes, beliefs, habits and values of ex presos relating to memorials, punitive justice, and reparations (Vidich and Shapiro 1955).

### **Scope and Limitations**

I limited the study to the members of the AEPPC, which means that I did not capture the entire community of ex presos in Córdoba. The members were almost exclusively from the city; the distance was too great for other ex presos living in other parts of the province to travel to the weekly meetings. Even within the capital city, some survivors either chose not to participate in the organization or were not able to attend meetings because of health reasons or previous commitments to their jobs and families. The AEPPC members distinguish themselves from other certain groups of survivors. For instance, they separate themselves from other survivors

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about methodology, despite her suffering from terminal stomach cancer at the time. Els passed away during the middle of my fieldwork process in the winter of 2008.

who are accused of having been collaborators with the military; the AEPPC did not admit these survivors as members.

Many AEPPC members theorized that they represent the middle because they were neither the poorest nor the richest. The ones facing dire financial problems could not afford to participate, and those who were financially comfortable felt no desire to lobby the government for further economic compensation. Others simply did not want to speak about the past. Some members stopped attending the meetings because of the rowdy debates and drama that comes with being in any organization. Still, considering the general lack of scholarship on former political prisoners, this research contributes to our understanding of Argentina's past from the perspective of those who directly experienced state violence.

Another limitation of this study is my reference to the Argentine human rights movement as a singular actor. Because the human rights groups are based on their biological relationship to the disappeared, they often collaborate and have their names listed together at rallies, marches, and memorialized spaces. Nonetheless, this study does not do justice to the multiple positions within each of the individual human rights groups.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

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