

Fierce, tireless grandmother

An interview by Luz Maria Martinez

Back in 1977, I did not know of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (the Association of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo); I had no need for them—I had no disappeared loved ones,” says Rosa ‘Rosita’ Roisinblit, vice-president of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, a group of grandmothers in Argentina pursuing the search for *desaparecidos*, loved ones who disappeared during the military regime in the ‘70s to early ‘80s. “But in 1979, my only daughter, eight months pregnant at the time, also disappeared.”

The Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo’s main goal is to find their grandchildren, who were infants at the time the Argentina dictatorship forcibly took them and their families away. The group is also looking for those children born in concentration camps to the regime’s political prisoners.

A fit, blond, blue-eyed woman with a sprint in her walk, Rosita speaks with unmistakable pride of her organization’s struggles and accomplishments. She is constantly travelling, exposing the injustice suffered by the victims of State aggression.

“The Abuelas is a group of grandmothers formed specifically to demand first, the return of our children and our grandchildren, and second, the investigation into their disappearances,” she says. The past dictatorship, she explains, found a potent tool of repression in the children of many men and women activists. These children were abducted as a way of deterring a new generation from growing up with subversive ideologies. Argentina could not risk these children following in their parents’ footsteps.

“Our children disappeared, and for many of us, we have given up hope of seeing them again. But our grandchildren must know that they were not abandoned, that they were kidnapped by the same people who killed or allowed their parents to be killed. These children have been deprived of their real families, their identity, their religion,” Rosita says.

Most of the children were ‘adopted’ by the torturers themselves or by families of the regime. “The parents of these children were intelligent, and the regime realized that their offspring would also be intelligent. There was a waiting list from military families for children of the detainees. They specified the sex, the color of the hair and eyes, and other features they wanted in a child.”

Babies born in the detention camps were given away to those on the list whose specifications for an adopted child matched. “But not all the children were adopted. Some were placed in orphanages,” Rosita notes.

Rosita, who is in her seventies, recounts her own story as mother and grandmother with sadness in her eyes, even though she has told this over and over again.

“My daughter, who was eight months pregnant then, and her husband were taken from their home one day. The 15-month-old-baby was left behind. Why the military people left her, we do not know, but they did. I searched for my daughter and would try to speak to women who, I had heard, shared the same prison with her. Some of them remember her and remember her delivering a baby boy. No one knows what happened to my daughter after her delivery.

“My suspicion is that the boy was abducted by a military

man who had been her jailer. I have pieced this together through the bits and pieces of information I gathered over the years.

"I no longer have hopes that my daughter is alive. I know that if she was still alive, she would have contacted someone, at least to know how her daughter is doing. We never heard from her since the day she was abducted. However, I do have hopes of finding my grandson. I know he is grown-up now and may not want to return home, but I want him to know that he has a family that loves him. His sister writes poems to him and stories about him. She thinks of him often. She too has hopes that one day, we will find her brother."

Rosita looks away for a few minutes, as if collecting her thoughts. "We have found over 49 children. We have on our organization families of more than 200 children reported as missing. They are active in the search for their loved ones."

Another landmark achievement for the Abuelas is the successful lobby it mounted for the passage of a law that created a genetic databank on the families of the disappeared. In 1987, the Abuelas, together with the Durand Hospital, established the National Bank for Genetical Data, which was envisioned to help the families track down their disappeared relatives. The databank now contains genetic information on 345 individuals belonging to families of disappeared children.

The services of the genetic databank are free of charge to the Abuelas members.

The organization offers legal counseling, assistance in investigations and psychological support for the searching families, and helps receive, rehabilitate and reorient those children who have surfaced. "We support the grandmothers at all stages of the investigation and

recovery. We publicize our investigations and recoveries, as well as the steps we take in our searches." The group also conducts training and seminars on human rights work.

Rosita's advocacy is straightforward. Although articulate and diplomatic, she is all passion as she lashes at the current government's policy on *desaparecidos*, fire flaring in her eyes. The government, she decries, promotes impunity as its strategy to clear away the horrors of the past.

Rosita rejects discussions of reparations, maintaining that reparation and reconciliation with the past can happen only when justice has been served.

Despite the relative space that came with a change of dispensation, the road ahead remains tough for the Abuelas. The group is receiving less and less funds nowadays, because for many funding groups, the problems of Argentina are all over. For donor agencies, there are now many other countries faced with more pressing problems that demand their attention.

For the Abuelas, however, the past remains very much alive, haunting them. They will know the meaning of peace only when they have recovered their grandchildren—the key that will finally seal yesterday's terrors. (Editor's Note: Human rights groups in Argentina are in the midst of a big campaign demanding action from their government, following the revelation by a former

military personnel of new information that sheds light on the human rights atrocities committed as the country's "dirty little war" raged.)



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