

**Rekindling the experience of freedom:
From the collective to the personal ... and back**

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On June 1984, in Santa Fe, capital of the province of the same name, in Argentina, I delivered a keynote presentation at the First Annual Congress of the Argentine Federation of Systemic Associations. This family therapy Congress coincided with a major transitional period in that country: it took place six months after the first civilian, democratically-elected, president in Argentina assumed office, following eight years of ruthless military rule. Fully aware of the momentous socio-political junction - the reawakening of democratic institutions and of individual awareness of freedom, after the stifling experience of living under a repressive military regime for many years - I chose, instead of delivering an address on one or another conceptual issue in the field of family therapy, to present and discuss a videotape of an interview that I had conducted in Argentina, two years before, with a family in which two central members had been "disappeared", i.e., abducted by military commandos and presumably tortured and killed. This paper describes and comments on that experience.

The political context

A bit of Argentine history is in order here. After participating in 1943 in a military coup that toppled a conservative government, Peron's charismatic appeal and populist-nationalist discourse - coupled with Evita's complementary presence as spiritual leader of the dispossessed - made him a powerful political leader, and allowed him to win, by landslide, a democratically held election in 1946 and then a re-election in 1952, while the country's economic surplus was being drained by mismanagement and Bonapartism. Soon after his re-election, and after the premature death of Evita, a series of confrontations between Peron and the traditional industrial establishment catalyzed several military coups, the last of them successful in deposing Peron in 1955. A rather moderate military president, General Aramburu, remained in power 5 years and created the context for semi-democratic elections (the Peronistas were banned from the contest). To this followed a succession of elected presidents who were in each case toppled by conservative military coups, in a quick succession. So President Frondizi

lasted a couple of years before being toppled in 1962. The ensuing military junta remained in power for a few years, followed by another moderate president, Illia who was also semi-democratically elected. In turn, in 1966 President Illia was toppled by another coup, led by General Onganía, who argued 'national security' threats created by Illia's economic open doors policy ("exotic ideologies", was the term used by military). That general, and then others members of the junta he represented, remained in power until 1972, when an election offered a choice between one of them, General Lanusse, or a representative of Peronism, Campora, a figurehead that offered as main electoral platform the promise to bring back Peron from exile and relinquish the power to him. After some extraordinary political maneuvers by Peron, who endorsed as "his true and only representatives" groups from the left, center, and right, Campora was elected by a landslide, offered Peron a blanket pardon, fulfilled his promise to put the old leader back as a candidate and, in fact, resigned. Peron was, in turn, overwhelmingly voted to assume the presidency. However, the coalition that brought him back to power soon broke up, with the left-wing Peronista Youth and other militant groups - alienated by his ultraconservative policies - withdrawing their support, and the right-wing groups consolidating their access to him and their grip to the repressive apparatus of the government. The scenario was set for an escalation that was leading toward a dangerous armed confrontation between ideologies. The old leader died in 1973 and the regime decayed into political chaos and corruption under the nominal leadership of Peron's widow, Isabel. During that period, several political groups, mainly splinters from the Peronista youth, went underground and began to organize themselves as paramilitary forces, initiating urban guerilla actions. In turn, extreme right wing organizations, with the clear support of the government, began a systematic policy of political assassinations (an estimated 2000 between 1973 and 1976) and anti-subversive actions that yielded progressively more power to the military, in what has been described as a "coup by quotas" (Hodges, 1976). That being insufficient to appease the increasingly empowered military, Isabel Peron's government was finally toppled by a coup in 1976. The new junta, carrying a messianic Christian discourse and a violent repressive agenda, arguing that there were still dangerous urban and rural guerrilla groups on the loose that could only be met by force, unleashed a major "dirty war" (a term coined by the very government), a "final solution" to subversion (cf., e.g., Hodges 1976, and Graziano 1992). For that purpose, it took hold of the already existing repressive machinery and expanded it by organizing its own additional (para) military

groups, operating from military bases, police precincts, and safe houses. What followed was a rule of terror characterized by targeted as well as random "disappearances", replicating quite literally the Night-and-Fog policies of the Nazi regime. The mass media were tightly leashed the "disappearance" of several journalists reinforced that message of silence - and all voices of concern or opposition crushed. The governmental repression continued as a routine much after all resemblance of armed opposition had disappeared. However, as the pillage of the country continued and the economic decay increased, the strong support the military government had received from industrialists and the Catholic Church progressively eroded. In an attempt at regaining popularity through an expected patriotic galvanization of the popular opinion, in 1982 the junta embarked in an ill-fated militaristic adventure: the recovery of the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands, an archipelago located off the coast of Patagonia and occupied by the U.K. since a century ago. The invasion was repelled at the cost of extensive casualties in the file and rank of the ill prepared Argentinean drafted armed forces, with many horror stories documented about the lack of logistic and medical support which led to important additional losses of life and limb. In utter humiliation, discombobulated by internal dissent and reciprocal accusations of ineptitude, the militaries conceded elections, and again the electorate chose a civilian, popularly elected president, Alfonsín, in 1983. A Commission was created to explore the fate of the '*desparecidos*¹' and to establish responsibilities for those atrocities. As the veil of silence began to lift, the joy of attaining democracy - the world was beginning to make sense again - was tainted by the uncovering of the extent of the human rights violation - it was too late for so many innocents.

The desaparecidos

Between 1976 and 1982, an estimated 15,000 persons were abducted from their homes or their work-place by military operatives and tortured and killed, in actions that were organized by the government to eliminate its opponents and to create a climate of intimidation that would squelch any voice of dissent. Some of the victims were actual militants in clandestine groups, but the vast majority were just students, union

¹ The militaries had enough time before leaving, however, to burn the archives and gut the building of the infamous SIDE, the Argentine's military secret security police that coordinated the repressive apparatus, masterminding torture centers and "disappearances".

representatives, intellectuals, journalists, people mentioned in torture sessions by others, or simply persons being at the wrong place at the wrong time - eliminating in that way, the militaries argued, those suspected of "future subversion". The vast majority of them died under torture, or were executed after torture and either buried in unmarked common graves, or disposed of by drugging them and throwing them off navy airplanes into the estuary of the Rio de la Plata or into the sea. At the same time, the official response of all public institutions was to deny any knowledge of the whereabouts of those individuals. They were the *desaparecidos*, the vanished ones. The deterrent effect in the general population of citizens disappearing without a trace, without any information provided about their whereabouts, was efficient and enduring. The main consistent voice of grief and grievance, made louder by the surrounding silence, came from a grassroots organization called "Madres de Plaza de Mayo" (Plaza de Mayo being the square flanking the Government house, where on a weekly basis mothers and other female relatives of *desaparecidos* would gather in silence with posters with the names and photos of those who were unaccounted for). Their consistent, dramatic, silent weekly presence, in spite of harassment by police and by media and of ridicule by the official communiqués, contributed to maintain alive the issue and to maintain, in the public eye and conscience, the governmental impunity and unaccountability for that collective murder. In fact, after the election of a democratic government, a National Commission on Disappeared was convened (with active participation of representatives of the Madres) that produced, after a rather thorough investigation, a *'j'accuse'* volume called "*Nunca Mas*" (Never More) (CONADEP, 1984). That report was used as a basis for the criminal trials of the members of the military junta that started the following year. As a painful epilogue, in 1989 president Menem, with the argument of "national reconciliation," granted presidential pardon to all the over 200 senior military officers convicted or being tried for human rights crimes connected to the "dirty war", to the relief of some and the dismay of many.

My presentation at that family therapy convention took place a few months after Alfonsín was elected President in 1993, as the National Commission was being organized and the media was warming up to the theme of human rights.

The context of the presentation

Argentina is a country with an unusually large number of therapists: Freudian, Kleinian, and Lacanian psychoanalysts, systemic and cognitive individual, couple and family therapists, brief and long-term, of all colors and persuasions, overabundant. Since before WWII, psychoanalysis, with the strong intellectual injection of talented Central European physicians escaping Nazism, became a well established, powerful, practice. In fact, Argentina had been, for many years, ranked second in the world in terms of the number of analysts, a training, for many years, limited to physicians. In addition, the schools of psychology, created by the state-based University system in the 60's, were replicated wildly in the 80's by the uncontrolled mushrooming of private colleges and universities that graduated thousands upon thousands of psychologists, far exceeding the market's ability to absorb them. In this cultural context, to consult to a therapist or to be in therapy has been perceived as an acceptable practice by the extended middle class of Argentina's largest cities, with little if any negative connotation entailed.

However, to be a therapist became a rather dangerous practice during the 1975-82 period of the military regime. Any of several circumstances could place a therapist under jeopardy: (a) patients may end up being subjects of a random or targeted abduction, and their therapist's name may appear in their address book, or be mentioned during torture, or, even worst, be included in a fabrication under torture; (b) a therapist may be denounced by a disgruntled neighbor, arguing "suspicious activities" due to the traffic of people in the office, especially if doing group therapy; and (c) there was an added risk if the therapist was professionally active in a mental health service or association considered by the military establishment as suspicious because of its rhetoric of commitment to the public sector, and, perhaps, by the fact that psychotherapy is in itself a reflective practice, dangerous for an authoritarian ideology. It should be also noted that the military displayed a clear anti-intellectual and hence anti-therapists bias: the therapeutic sector - mainly represented by psychoanalytically-based therapies was seen, probably correctly, as more agnostic (in contrast to the strong Catholic affiliation of the military), more liberal (in contrast to the military's conservativeness), and more socially concerned than desirable (as an expression of a democratic vocation). The fact that there was a comparatively higher proportion of Jews among psychoanalysts didn't help, given the basically anti-Semitic worldview of the Argentine military and conservative class. So, even though it could not be said that therapists in Argentina were core targets

of the repressive apparatus, they were nonetheless considered a moderately suspicious group.

Many psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and psychologists left the country during that period, some as a safety precaution, many after being informed that they were in an abduction list or after having experienced hairy near-misses with military abduction groups, some, in fact, after having survived torture. Most therapists, however, remained in the country during the seven years of that military regime. And those who remained tended to develop "safer" practices: most simply discontinued all group therapy activities (some kept them for a while but adding ad hoc rituals such as requesting group therapy patients to enter and leave their office staggered in 5-minute intervals), some screened their patients to select only those patients who could be deemed "safe", i.e., patients that did not belong to any group that may be at higher risk of abduction; many discontinued their involvement with the public sector, some simply ceased practicing as therapists, and, alas, some continued "business as usual" and took the risk. A small minority, it should be added, maintained committed or militant practices that actively included working with risky populations, such as families of *desaparecidos*.

To live under a repressive regime progressively entailed, for the general population therapists included-, avoiding social practices considered potentially dangerous, such as talking about social or political themes in public settings or by phone or with non-intimates. Even further, almost unavoidably this interdiction to talk became partly if not totally internalized as a progressive ban on mentation/perception related to those risky themes: it was better not only not to talk about those issues but not to think about them and not to perceive them as relevant. "Reality" was, hence, for many, fraught with blind areas². Disappearances, for instance, became, for a sizeable segment of the population - some therapists included, of course, - either a fabrication of the discon- or an exaggeration of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, or one of those nuisances of life that happen to people far away from us and "probably for some good reason".

² 2 This effect has been widely discussed in terms of whether the German population was or was not aware of the disappearance and eventual extermination of German Jews. For a powerful and polemical analysis of that issue, cf. Goldhagen, 1996.

The family therapy convention where this material was presented took place as the lid of the repressive apparatus was being lifted, the newly democratically elected government was assuming its responsibilities, and the media were beginning to re-legitimize practices of freedom, including the discourse on the *desaparecidos*. However, it should be noted that that convention - neither in the announcements nor in its title - had been explicitly defined as a marker (it was "a congress", not "a celebration to the return of democracy"): Argentina was only slowly awakening - beginning to open its eyes, reactivating its cognition, reconnecting with its emotions - almost without knowing, after the long and terrible night of political terror.

The presentation and the actual interview

After expressing my appreciation for the invitation to address the Congress, I started my presentation by defining myself as privileged by the circumstances: living abroad robbed me from the experience of sharing their actual lived experience; at the same time, visiting the country as a professional offered me some unusual glimpses into its realities. I then informed them that I was going to project a videotaped consultation that I had conducted two years ago, and provided the context for that interview. To that followed the actual video of the family interview' projected in a large screen, in turn followed by comments and by discussion with the audience.

This family interview took place in Buenos Aires in 1981, during a period in which the military government, having lost its internal enemy, appeared aimless, unwilling to acknowledge its repressive policy while reducing the virulence of its repressive apparatus, unable to define a political or economic platform beyond a soft conservatism, and increasingly weakened by corruption and nepotism. Less than a year later, the *Malvinas / Falkland* war would be declared in the above-mentioned desperate attempt at realigning the citizens with the government by means of creating a straw-man common enemy.

The interview had been conducted in the offices of a private family-oriented mental health clinic, which was the main resource for the mental health services of a health insurance. A public school counselor, who in turn was concerned because of the

depressed looks and avoidance-hostile behavior in a 7-year old boy, had referred them to that institution. In the course of the phone call in which the family member requested the appointment, she was informed that the whole family was expected to be included in the initial consultation. She answered hesitantly that both the identified patient and his 9-year old sister considered her their mother, but she was, in fact, their aunt, and that her brother was, in turn, considered by the children as the father. By the ambiguous style in which she conveyed this information she was telling much more: she was hinting to the receptionist that there were things she could not reveal, at least not by phone, generally considered an "unsafe" medium. The receptionist had little doubt that this family was one in which there were *desaparecidos*, and she wisely rephrased the request: she was expected to bring those who lived together to the initial consultation.

I happened to be in Argentina for a short period, and fortuitously visiting that clinic, providing some clinical supervision and consultation. I was invited in that context to conduct an initial consultation that was promising to be rather challenging, even more considering the prediction that it would contain a "hot" issue, such as political issues. The group with whom I was working, namely, the eight therapists from the clinic, were going to observe the interview behind a one-way mirror, if the family would accept. I agreed.³

In due time, I greeted the family at the waiting room. They introduced themselves to me: the two children - a very lively 9 year-old girl and a subdued 7-year old boy - , their grandmother, and three of her offspring, two introduced as the children's aunt and uncle, "but the kids call them mommy and daddy and doctor, they have done everything for them since they were very little." The third one, a man with a voluminous cast on his arm, was introduced as another uncle who was a merchant marine, usually at sea but temporarily in leave while healing from a major work-related injury, and also living at their home. I then I invited them to pass into the interview room. The aunt delayed me,

³ This interview was videotaped with the authorization of the family. The quality of the audio component of the interview was excellent, but the video was rather dark. This proved to be fortunate, as it preserved the family's anonymity and confidentiality, aided only by the occasional introduction of white noise when the participants provided identificatory verbal information in the course of the conversation. That video has been presented publicly only once, in the context of the above-mentioned convention. The narrative of the interview - both in this article and in another one in which it appears (Sluzki 1990) - contains some intentional distortions for that same purpose.

signaling that she wanted to talk privately with me to start with. I made a motion to invite her again to pass, and she argued in low voice, "But, it is for the kids. . ." I answered, with a similar voice, "Ma'am, whatever it is, probably the kids know. But you don't have to talk about anything that you don't feel comfortable talking." And again I invited her to enter the interview room, which she did. I started by requesting again their authorization to be observed by a team of professionals - it had been presented to them by phone previously that day, - assuring them that the consultation would take place one way or another. I also invited them to visit at any time the room behind the one-way mirror where the colleagues would be observing the interview, and to be introduced to the members of the team (they, in fact, did that at the end of the interview).

The interview proper, which has been discussed in detail in a previous paper (Sluzki, 1990), started in a subdued manner but quickly gained in intensity, and was filled with extremely moving moments. In it, the secret of the disappearance of both parents of the children proved to be known by everybody: even the 9 years-old girl, in a heartwrenching matter-of-fact style, told everybody her memories of when, three years before, a military group came at night, entered their humble house with portable machine-guns and took her mother in an unmarked police car. A second issue, that according to the family triggered the boy's depression, was also openly discussed: uncle-daddy had announced that he was planning to become engaged to be married. The boy, in turn, openly expressed, in the session, his fear that if "daddy" would get married he would no longer be able to be his son. An emotional exchange between him and his uncle followed that revelation. A third theme discussed in the interview was the multiple somatic disorders that had plagued all members of this family since the disappearance of the biological parents of the children. I tied that abundance of somatic expressions to the despair derived from lacking recourse and the increasingly untenable policy of keeping the secret of the *desaparecidos* "for everybody's sake" (including the mythical assumption - openly challenged during the session - that, if they would not mention the issue, their *desaparecidos* would be kept alive, as the militaries told them during the abductions.) The dilemma or ambiguity of whether their missing loved ones were alive or dead - whether even to talk about the latter possibility - and the difference in their life between "knowing and not knowing," was openly explored. It was as if time, and the evolution of this family, had been frozen, robbing them from any capacity to act, a phenomenon inextricably tied to the ambiguous loss (Boss, 1988.) The climate of the session was

extremely intense while subdued, warm and supportive, and profoundly moving. No politically taboo subject was left untouched, braving gently but relentlessly through the barrier of the highly ambiguous language which characterized most conversations during that period of political repression. As the consultation was ending I invited into the room, and introduced to the family, the colleague that had been assigned to continue working with them, and that until then had observed the interview through the one-way screen together with her colleagues.

This interview entailed for me an extremely intense emotional experience. I felt elated and extremely fortunate of having being able to be there for them at that time. I admired this family's capacity for endurance and survival as well as the strengths, openness, and courage with which they embraced change. And I was also relieved by my impression that I had succeeded in be effective in facilitating a transformative process throughout the interview.

I should add that the group of colleagues that observed the interview behind the one-way mirror - they commented to me afterwards - had been openly crying throughout parts of the consultation, and some had to leave that room occasionally in an attempt at controlling the intensity of their own emotional experience. They ended up extremely appreciative of the way the session had been conducted ... and exhausted with the experience. It was, one of them said, as if they would have entered into a forbidden, dangerous territory, and recovered by that token a true dimension of their responsibility as therapists, and as human beings.

Needless to say, in the course of the interview, extremely dramatic and powerful themes intertwined with comparatively mundane, daily life, issues-such as discussions about the sailor's broken arm and what was he planning to do for the next few months of rehabilitation, how was the children's performance in school, or the relationship between the recently deceased children's grandfather and the rest of the family.

During the presentation at the Congress, I paused the videotape at several key moments to comment on interactions that were not clearly audible, as well as on some family dynamics and therapeutic processes. That modality of presentation had a certain "cooling", distancing, effect, as it returned the audience to the frame of the Congress. In

fact, a couple of colleagues commented afterwards that they found my asides distracting, as they wanted to see the session without interruptions. I had been tempted beforehand to show the interview in one piece, especially considering the powerful nature of its central theme. However, I decided otherwise, as I wanted to neutralize the "fascination for content" that powerful themes tend to evoke which, rather than enhancing the audience's capacity to bridge emotions with cognition, may have dissolved it into a pure flood of emotional empathy. I thought that it would be more useful, so to speak, to wake the audience up occasionally from the dream (or nightmare).

Once the projection of the interview was concluded, I wrapped up my presentation with a rather succinct and, I would say, emotional, comment about the enactment of freedom embedded in the act of being able to show that session. I also commented on the joy of being able to share with the audience an experience that I hoped would be emblematic of the new era for that country.

The reaction of the audience

The participants to the convention responded to the end of my presentation with an unusually long and enthusiastic applause. The question-and-answer period that followed contained effusive expression of appreciation as well as a number of personal, moving testimonials and statements by the participants. Scheduling need of the convention placed an end to that period, but the exchanges continued in the corridors as many participants surrounded me with comments, confessions, confidences, as well as further accolades. In subsequent months I also received several letters from colleagues who attended that presentation discussing their reactions to it. The comments that follow stem from those exchanges.

Many participants praised my presentation labeling it as extremely courageous. Even though I would describe it as very well timed, I did not experience nor I would define my presentation as an act of courage: the interview proper took place, as already mentioned, during a period in which the repressive activities of the regime had diminished drastically, it had been conducted in a rather neutral, safe environment, and

the presentation was taking place in the context of an incipient democratic regime. The fact that it was perceived as courageous indicated to me that the presentation had been contextualized by the audience according to past, rather than present, risks. From this angle, it can be asserted that the experience of being an audience for that presentation contributed for many to de-freeze time, as I will discuss further below.

Among the audience there were some who described a first reaction of fear ("Carlos is crazy!" they thought, "He is placing us all at risk!" "He doesn't understand how things are in Argentina!") They were actually terrified, they commented, that the police would raid the place and detain us all, and they were scanning the auditorium to locate the emergency exits; they were even tempted to leave the room surreptitiously. They began to re-calibrate their reaction upon realizing that other participants were not displaying signals of alarm. And only after a while, slowly in some cases and rather abruptly in others, they became aware that their fears were not founded, that it was no longer dangerous to discuss previously forbidden issues such as this one. Their relief and joy was immense.

Many were, however, simply stunned. As they told me by letter or in conversations in subsequent years, they found themselves unable to move beyond their own emotional reaction, frozen in surprise, or in grief, or in numbness. The issues and the emotions brought forth by the interview kept on appearing unexpectedly in the following months almost as a post-traumatic intrusive recall. It took them a while, they told me, to be able to follow the plea I made at the end of my presentation: "Keep on talking about all this, keep on talking" (a pragmatic variation, in fact, of the dictum "Whatever we cannot talk about we are condemned to repeat.")

Some, they told me afterwards, were flooded with shame⁴ because of what they described as their prior lack of involvement, their not having wanted to believe, their having defined all those horrors as none of their business. Many wanted to do something about it, to repair, as therapists, what they felt was a social debt. Therapists to the end, they talked spontaneously about their own "survivor's guilt". Many shifted throughout the presentation from guilt into rage, as they began to experience having been brainwashed

by the pervasive practices of the repressive government, the evidence of their own second-hand victimization. Many connected, in the very corridor of the auditorium, or afterwards, with those therapists who had identified themselves, during the question-and-answer period, as connected with the "Madres de Plaza de Mayo" or the National Commission for the Investigation of Disappeared Persons, and asked to become involved.

Others described being progressively flooded with reminiscences of people whom they knew and who had in the past few years either disappeared or left the country. They disconnected at times from the content of my presentation to connect with those powerful reactivated (if not recovered) memories, emerging in many cases with an intensity that surprised them.

Some participants commented later to me that they had been actively involved in working with families of disappeared, but they had been doing it still semi-secretly, not talking about it outside of their own team, not writing about it nor discussing their work publicly, as if it would be still a dangerous activity. Their witnessing my presentation had been an experience that made them realize the importance of discussing those practices open and public, that their relative secrecy was still a remnant of their recent collective dark past.

Finally, there were participants who had been active and public in their work with human rights, and with the families of the *desaparecidos*. They felt validated not only by my presentation but also by the many colleagues who in turn surrounded them requesting additional information, or contacted them later to see how to join them in their efforts.

Discussion

The repressive apparatus of totalitarian regimes contain in their design two seemingly incompatible goals, to suppress the witness and to inform others of that suppression. A prime and terrible example of the suppression of the witness has been the Holocaust, a

⁴ 4 Emotions, "insofar as they have a moral role, contribute to the preservation of the moral rules of a society" (Armon-Jones, 1986, p.57). Many emotions were collectively repressed / banned during the military

process aimed at eliminating all witness to the very process to which they were subject (a systematic killing of all subjects, crowned with a final "housekeeping" frenzy aimed at killing the few remaining prisoners when the liberation armies were near). Another good example has been the events that serve as political context for this paper, the Argentine "dirty war", in which thousands of subjects were detained and tortured, and most of them killed, their bodies disposed of without trace. To increase the goal of suppression, during their historical occurrence those events and procedures avoided outside witnessing. In the case of the Holocaust, Jews (and Gypsies, homosexuals, psychiatric patients, Communists and countless other sub-groups) were taken to "detention", "internment" or "transition" (not "extermination") camps, and their neighbors or other occasional "outside" witnesses were informed that those people were being relocated or sent to work camps ("Arbeit macht frei" - "Work will make you free" - was written in forged iron letters at the entrance gate to Auschwitz). In fact, the extermination machinery was operating *sub rosa*, not "in the face" of others that could bear witness. In the case of the *desaparecidos*, operatives would usually take place in the midst of the night, in unmarked cars, with little public fanfare, and the very procedures existence was immediately denied by the official authorities both in each concrete case and in public discourses by the government authorities. In addition, powerful official injunctions steadily reminded the population about the danger of bearing witness, and dramatically reduced the likelihood that an occasional witness would consider offering public testimony. Further, the very victim of those atrocities, if they survived, made a poor witness. The destruction of the humanity of the victims through arbitrary detention, dehumanizing treatment, torture, etcetera, compelled the few surviving victims' silence: their experience lies so beyond the realm of the expected, bypassed so many of the parameters of what is considered "acceptable reality", that those few persons that survived the torture and that, for one reason or another, were then freed, organized alternative, parallel selves. To function as human beings we require a reasonable amount of coherency or continuity between history, current events and prospect, and the discontinuous nature of those memories of daily atrocities create memories that cannot be integrated to the rest of the human experience: former victims do not do anything about their experiences, do not denounce, do not militate, they just go on living with a discontinuous island of permanent nightmare (cf. Langer, 1991).

The other goal is, as mentioned above, to inform or remind the population about the absolute power of the state and of the risk of any dissent, i.e., that it is preferable to accept the state's description of what constitutes reality than to question it or to propose alternative descriptions. In fact, "the first step on the road to total domination is to kill the juridical person in man" (Arendt, 1958), that is, "to make the attainment of justice appear hopeless and its pursue pointless" (Waschler, 1990.) Resignation, adaptation, and even indoctrination were preferable or, in some cases, unavoidable. This effect of "thought reform" has been eloquently described in the literature about people who have been under the influence of a cult or sect (Singer, 1996), but is in fact one of the most harmful collective effects of living under dictatorships.

Both the suppression of the witness (the no-man's land of the disappeared) and the internalized injunction against a critical view were illustrated dramatically during the interview and, experientially, during the presentation. The public display of the videotaped interview was, at the same time, blatantly countermanding those goals.

In fact, an important part of the impact of my presentation can be attributed to the fact that it permitted an act of collective witnessing: the participants were not only witnessing a dramatic, politically and personally meaningful videotaped interview, they were witnessing themselves in the act of being witness.⁵ That allowed them to compare themselves then - when the repressive apparatus was in place - and now - where practices of freedom were permitted and even encouraged. Further, they were witnessing themselves in a collective setting which, in the process, mutated from unsafe to safe. The effect of the experience was one of mending in the fabric of time, a realization of a qualitative change in their context, the (re) discovery of the ability to think without internalized bans. The presentation became, in fact, a communion of sorts, an act of (re) initiation, a collective ritual, a ceremony of practices of freedom that allow them to realize, experientially, that in fact freedom was there for them to experience, enact, enjoy, and carry with all its unavoidable load of responsibilities.

A feature of the interview that resonated intensely in the audience and generated many comments was not only that the themes touched were extremely hot but their delivery by

⁵ "The listener has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself" (Laub, 1992).

the family was cool and devoid of any expression of indignation or of blame (to the military junta, or to anybody). They were living their painful circumstances matter-of-factly, either resigned or, more probably, stunned and surrendered to their hopelessness. To witness that lack of moral indignation, so clearly an effect of the violence of the State, enhanced a reaction of moral indignation on the part of the audience: they themselves have been also victims in one way or another, but they would do something about it.

The family interviewed embodied thousands of families around that country, living in limbo, unable to mourn their dead, unable to go on with their lives. The interview was not only powerful - it dealt openly with politically taboo and emotionally loaded issues - but clearly therapeutic for the family: it broke down silencing practices, it weaved a series of somatic concerns (an "authorized" code) with words and emotions (an "illegal" code), it canonized until-then ambiguous roles, et cetera. And the viewing of the interview was extremely therapeutic for the audience, composed of therapists: it allowed them to witness an instance of therapy as a reparative practice, As the act of witnessing crime taints us, shame us, makes us part of the crime, the act of witnessing a therapeutic process heals us, repairs us. By extension, it reminded them that their own practices had, in many cases, and could have, in many others, that same reparative function. Thus, their own healing process after a long period of obfuscation could be channeled through their professional practice: opening their practices to those themes would open their minds to those issues, therapy would become a practice of freedom, as it has been to this family. The ecology of silence could thus be broken. They themselves, extending their help to people who suffered under the violence of state, would be able to mourn while helping others to mourn, to reassume living through helping others do so, to reactive their thoughts and emotions while de-freezing them with others.⁶

Indeed, many of the issues discussed in the course of the interview resonated powerfully with dilemmas that professionals in the audience themselves had experienced during that repressive period: whether or not to acknowledge the dramatic reality of the disappearances, whether or not to talk, whether or not to act. In fact, this type of

⁶ The same happened, in fact, with members of that family: both grandmother and aunt/mommy became, one year later, actively involved in human rights issues, and in criminal trials against the members of the military junta.

immobilizing binds are typical of repressive regimes (and of violence in families), and are an almost unavoidable effect of a mystifying twist by which the State, who is assumed to be the keeper of individual and collective rights, not only violates those very rights but simultaneously denies that those rights are being violated, silencing dissent and punishing denunciations (Sluzki, 1993).

"Knowing and not knowing." Those words, used by this family, are also the title of an insightful essay on traumatic memory by Laub and Auerhahn (1993). In massive trauma, these authors point out, the blurring of the boundaries between reality and fantasy evokes emotions of such an intensity that exceeds the capacity of the self or ego to organize reality, or itself. Hence, knowledge, or at least certainty, is avoided. Through this effect, "torture destroys the world", i.e., the ability to construct a sensible reality (Scarry, 1985). That happened to this family: it didn't require much challenge on my part to show the weakness of the arguments with which they kept denying the extreme likelihood of the death of their loved ones. To acknowledge their death exposed them to an invasion of intense rage, impotence, shame, and fear. It also would allow them to shed the immobility of their endless waiting and hoping against hope - akin to those of the families of missing-in-action: they would have had to confront the need to go on with their lives. They would have, for instance, to redefine the reciprocal roles between adults and children in ways that would enact the permanence of the absence of their disappeared; ultimately, it would seal the relational consequences of their individual lives vis-a-vis one another. For the professional audience, in turn, a parallel process seems to have taken place, and not only by proxy: they too had to shed whatever vestige of denial may have kept in action, they too had to expose themselves to the flood of their own intense mixed emotions that accompanies the fall of the Wall.

The private pain of this family, made into public spectacle by projecting their videotaped interview to a professional audience in a crucial political moment, became a catalytic factor toward a transformative experience. Facilitated by the collective nature of the process, the participants - becoming sometimes actors by identification, sometime witnesses, sometimes witnesses of others' witnessing - were able to begin to shed a constraint that they had incorporated as a result of years of submersion into a milieu of dictatorship, restricting their capacity to think-feel-act. That process catalyzed their ability

to reconnect with their emotions, their capacity to reflect, and facilitated a responsible reinsertion in their social context that re-legitimized their reparative potential as healers, as agents of change, and as members of a democratic collective.

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