

## **HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY FOR SOME**

### **Musings on Argentina's Human Rights Legacy and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo**

**>by Ada Letelier. Published on: Friday, May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2010**

On Sept. 11, 1973 there was a military coup in Chile that ushered in a 17-year dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte. Democracy was restored in 1989 when Patricio Aylwin was elected president, winning 55 percent of the votes, effectively ending Pinochet's rule over Chile. Pinochet died while awaiting trial for human rights abuses and crimes committed during his presidency.

On March 24, 1976 Isabel Peron was taken out of office by a military junta, led by General Jorge Rafael Videla. During Videla's dictatorship (1976-1983) 30,000 people are estimated to have died compared with less than 3,000 in Chile under Pinochet.

Most who died were young Argentines whose only crime was that of wanting to change the world in which they lived by creating a more egalitarian Argentina. Most were kidnapped, taken to torture chambers and disappeared. Many were buried in unmarked graves or heavily sedated and thrown from planes into the Atlantic Ocean.

This period of terror and brutality has become known as Argentina's Dirty War (Guerra Sucia) due to the cruelty, indiscriminate violence and persecution used by those in power to silence the opposition.

On April 30, 1977, 14 mothers marched into the Plaza de Mayo in open defiance of the military regime, demanding a full accounting of their missing sons and daughters. The mothers chose the Plaza de Mayo because it is located in front of the Pink House (Casa Rosada) – the official residence of the executive branch of the government of Argentina. These 14 mothers had all but exhausted the means open to them to try and find their missing children. They also began to recognize one another, oftentimes bumping into each other as they traveled from one bureaucratic office to another trying to get information.

On March 20, 2008, a Thursday, I visited Buenos Aires and went to the Plaza de Mayo. And there they were, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, walking around the Pyramid of May (Piramide de Mayo) – the first national historical monument ever built in Buenos Aires. It has now been 30 years since these mothers began their crusade, meeting at their regularly appointed time of 3:30pm on Thursdays and walking counter clockwise around the pyramid. With their trademark white head scarves and photos of their missing sons and daughters hanging around their necks, these mothers have become a "global symbol" for resistance to oppression, lending their voices of support to human rights causes around the world.

This fierce determination on their part to fight tyranny and oppression wherever it may be happening has earned them world-wide recognition and gratitude. In 1980 the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

That this act of civil disobedience – and these mothers knew this at the time—put them in grave danger can be attested to by the fact, that not only one, but three of the founding mothers were subsequently abducted and disappeared. It wasn't until 2005 when human remains found along the Atlantic coast of Buenos Aires were positively identified as those of Azucena Villaflor de DeVincente, Esther Ballestrino de Careaga and Maria Ponce de Bianco.

Indeed, it had been Azucena who encouraged the mothers to take this bold step way back then. "In Unity there is power" she told the other mothers. It was she who became their spiritual leader, the voice that kept propelling them on, even as the threats became more and more real.

It was she who the other mothers turned to for advice as to how to proceed when authorities began to throw up roadblocks to prevent them from meeting. The local police, upon seeing the increased numbers of mothers coming to meet at the Plaza de Mayo, told them that groups of more than two were not permitted to gather at a single site, in accordance with the State of Siege policy imposed by the military junta. "Keep walking," the police ordered.

And so they did, walking around the Piramide de Mayo, two by two, just as they were told to do. And to this day, the mothers walk around the pyramid for a half-hour every Thursday, turning this act of resistance into a symbol for their cause. The difference being that today, instead of marching two by two, there are hundreds who, like myself, ask for permission to join their walk around the pyramid as a show of solidarity with their cause.

Mother's Day was celebrated in many countries around the world this month. The second Sunday in May has become the official date for celebrating Mother's Day in many countries. Some countries celebrate Mother's Day but not on this same day.

On this most recent Mother's Day, celebrated in Chile on Sunday, May 10<sup>th</sup>, my thoughts kept going back to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. For 30 years they have been waiting to find out what happened to their sons and daughters. For thirty years they have waited to give their loved ones a proper burial and thus bring closure to their agonizing ordeal.

Their oft-chanted slogan of "Bring Them Back Alive" is a reality that they will never live to see and that they have come to accept. For 30 years they have waited to bring to justice those who were responsible for the kidnapping, incarceration, torture and murder of their sons and daughters.

While many of their sons and daughters lie dead in unmarked graves or at the bottom of the ocean, many of their tormentors are still alive, walking around free, never having had to account for their part in these disappearances, torture and murders.

Time is running out for many of these mothers. Most are grey-haired and walk with a determination that belies their age. The younger ones still have years in which to keep on walking,

insisting that they won't give up until there is a full accounting of what happened to their loved ones and that those responsible be brought to justice.

The world stood still and watched as these atrocities took place. It was the Cold War and anyone suspected of being allied with the communists was not considered worth saving. So Happy Mother's Day to those who had something to celebrate. As for the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, if they can fight for us, shouldn't we be fighting for them?