CHILD SACRIFICE

For Argentina's rulers during the 'dirty war', being childless was a problem easily solved: they simply stole babies and murdered their parents. Now hundreds of children like these are making a grim discovery. Christine Toomey investigates

TODDLER FOUND
Claudio and Monica Logares with Paula (above). A picture of Paula (right) sent to her grandmother, Elsa Pavón. They are reunited (far right)

Of the children pictured on pages 20 and 21, seven were born in prison camps, the rest disappeared in infancy with their parents. Three are known to have died, and about two-thirds are now with their biological families. The silhouettes represent hundreds more believed to have been born in prison camps

The phone call is chilling. It is 1983 and six years since Cecilia Viñas's parents have heard from their 30-year-old daughter when she calls late one evening and asks urgently: "How is my little boy?" When she hears her father's confused reply – "I don't understand. What little boy? Where are you?" – Cecilia becomes hysterical and incoherent. Then the line goes dead. Several weeks pass before she calls again. She can't say where she is, only that some "good guys" on night duty where she is being held are allowing her access to the phone. Again she wants to know what has happened to her baby. She describes giving birth to a son in a prison camp and being told that he would be given to her family to look after until her release.

Six more calls follow over the next three months. One is recorded by her family; it is muffled, but Cecilia can be heard moaning softly: "I want to come home, Mama."

"I'm here for you, my love. I'll go wherever you are to take care of you," her mother replies.

"Please, please help me, Mama," wails Cecilia. "Help me find my son."

Cecilia has remained among the estimated 30,000 men, women and children "disappeared" by Argentina's military regime during the country's 1976-83 "dirty war". She was seven months pregnant when she was seized with her husband, Hugo Penino, from their Buenos Aires apartment on the night of July 13, 1977. She became a target of suspicion for the security forces after joining the union at the car plant where she worked. In the name of fighting a left-wing insurgency, the military rounded up tens of thousands of innocent civilians. Most were never seen again. It was enough to be on the wrong mailing list or in the wrong address book to be arrested, tortured and killed. Cecilia contacted her family in the months after the fall of the junta in October 1983, but this gave little cause for optimism – political prisoners continued to be executed.

But what they discovered about the fate of her child, like many others born in prison camps, has led in recent months to criminal charges being brought against eight leading members of the former military regime. Men like former president Jorge Videla, who believed they could enjoy a comfortable retirement after getting presidential pardons "in the interests of national reconciliation" for their part in atrocities committed during the dirty war, are now being held under house arrest pending trial later this year on charges of falsifying documents and kidnapping in relation to seized infants and children born in the detention camps.

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Javier Vildoza grew up in the middle-class suburb of Martinez to the north of Buenos Aires. Neighbours saw little of the young boy. Few visitors were permitted to enter the house, which was decorated with naval memorabilia collected by his father, Jorge Vildoza, a captain with the Argentine army. Only those Jorge worked with knew the key role he played at the navy mechanics school, best known by its Spanish acronym Esma, a complex of elegant buildings and clipped lawns that still operates as a training base on one of the capital's main thoroughfares. During the dirty war the Esma was the most notorious of the country's estimated 300 detention and torture centres, where, ironically, corridors had signs such as Avenue of Happiness.

It was from the Esma that thousands were sedated, loaded onto military planes, stripped naked and hurled to their deaths in the South Atlantic. Only recently has it emerged through the testimony of a retired naval lieutenant haunted by his conscience that Vildoza was one of those in charge of these weekly "death flights".

At the height of the military repression, neighbours knew better than to ask too many questions. Even Vildoza and his wife Ana Maria's two teenage children, Jorge Jr and Monica, were given no explanation when their father brought a small baby home from work one day, telling them: "This is your new brother." Jorge Jr, now 41, who went on to become a naval intelligence officer, is still guarded with strangers. All he will say of his younger brother's childhood is: "My parents gave Javier a wonderful home... They loved him more than they loved me and my sister."

SOMBRE FATE
Cecilia Viñas and her husband, Hugo Penino (above), were arrested. Their baby, Javier, was taken to live with army captain Jorge Vildoza (right)

In 1985 the family's quiet existence was interrupted. Vildoza was issued with a court order obliging him to subject the young boy to blood tests to prove his paternity. The order came after a paediatrician attending to Javier at home alerted authorities to suspicions that Vildoza and his wife seemed old enough to be the boy's grandparents and bore no physical resemblance to him. Rather than comply with the court order, the Vildoza family fled the country. They moved to Paraguay, then Brazil, before seeking refuge in several European countries, believed to have included Germany and Britain. The natural children later returned to Argentina.

A year ago, Javier discovered on the Internet that he was believed to be the son of Cecilia Viñas and Hugo Penino, and that the man he had grown up believing was his father was wanted for questioning by police in Argentina. "I found out that my father is accused of not being my biological father but a military officer who stole me as a baby in the 1970s... It is a lie... My parents raised me with everything a decent person could want or need. It is impossible for me to believe these accusations," he wrote in May last year to the judge he learnt had authorised an arrest warrant against Vildoza.

Without disclosing where he was living abroad, the 21-year-old said he was returning to Argentina to take a DNA test to "put an end to all this". When the result of the test revealed with 99.99% certainty that he was Cecilia and Hugo's son, Javier was said to be "stunned". At a meeting arranged by the judge between Javier and his maternal grandmother shortly afterwards, the young man greeted her stiffly by shaking her hand.

It was not until Javier met his father's sister, Lupe Penino, and her daughters, cousins close to his own age, that he seemed to warm to his biological family. The girls took him disco-dancing and spent hours sifting through old family photographs. "Javier reminds me so much of my brother. He has the same smile, gestures, hair and eyes," says Lupe, while sitting with two of her daughters at their modest home in the seaside resort of Mar del Plata, 250 miles south of Buenos Aires. "Clearly he has been brought up with a lot of money. He is ⟶

BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY OF ANDREW GRAHAM-YOOLL

COURT BATTLE
Juan Carlos and Stella Vicario (above). Their daughter, Jimena, now 23 (near right, with friends). Her grandmother had to go to law to get her back

well mannered and well educated. He said he was studying for a business degree abroad. He would not say where. But he talked of travelling a lot. He said he liked skiing and German beer and supported Liverpool.

"He spoke with affection about Jorge, whom he calls his brother. He cried when it was time to leave. He said he was happy he had found his family. But this is all very hard for him. He needs time to adjust," says Lupe, cuddling her one-week-old granddaughter, who is swaddled in a yellow blanket she originally knitted for Javier before his mother disappeared.

Neither the Penino nor the Viñas family has seen Javier since those meetings at the end of last year. He phones occasionally but will not disclose his whereabouts. When he first came back to Argentina he lived with Jorge Jr in Buenos Aires in an apartment close to the Esma. Before Easter they moved, leaving no forwarding address. According to confidential court documents, Interpol believes Jorge Vildoza, for whom an international arrest warrant has now been issued, could be in hiding in Zimbabwe.

The emotional turmoil of discovering the lie he has lived has been complicated by the demands of Argentine law. This requires that Javier surrender his passport, on the grounds that it was obtained using a false birth certificate, and apply for a new one to correspond with the surname of his biological family. So far he has refused to relinquish his old identity. This means he cannot leave the country. "We don't know where he is. The last time he called he said he was snowboarding with friends in the south," says Lupe. "It is hard to imagine what he is going through. But at least he knows now who his real family is. He knows how much he is loved and how hard we searched for him."

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On the fourth floor of a cramped apartment building in the bustling centre of Buenos Aires, an indomitable group of elderly women gather every week to discuss new leads in their efforts to locate others like Javier who were born in clandestine detention camps or seized as infants. The women, who call themselves the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, have details of 250 women who were pregnant when they were arrested. But they estimate that the true figure could be twice as high, since some mothers only discovered through their daughters' friends, after they were arrested, that the young women had been pregnant. To further complicate any process of statistical accuracy, in parts of Argentina entire families were exterminated, leaving no survivors to report details.

The grandmothers – an offshoot of the high-profile Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who have staged demonstrations in front of the presidential palace every Thursday for 22 years in an effort to force the government to disclose the fate of their missing loved ones – have all lost a daughter who was expecting a baby when she was arrested, or a son who was seized together with his pregnant wife or partner.

According to the few who survived military detention, pregnant women were given preferential treatment until their babies were born. "Expectant mothers were kept separate from other prisoners. They were given a bottle of milk a day to keep them healthy. They were given beautiful clothes for the babies they were expecting, to keep them quiet. It was so cruel. They were used like human incubators," said Miriam Lewin, 41, who was held prisoner for one year at the Esma and survived because her ability to speak French and English was useful to the military as they monitored what was being said about them in the foreign press.

Lewin, who was asked to assist in the birth of one baby boy, said most of the women believed their babies were going to be looked after by their families until they were released. In many cases, the young mothers were "invited" by the military to write letters to their families, which, they were told, would be passed on when the babies were handed over. Other political prisoners have testified to seeing a list that was kept of military families and others with close links to the military who wanted to adopt these babies, and which even stipulated what sex, hair and eye colour they wanted the infant to have.

So far, the grandmothers have traced 50 of these children. Seven were found to have perished together with their parents – their bodies were among those discovered in mass graves exhumed after the fall of the junta. Thirteen more children were adopted by couples unconnected with the military regime and were allowed by their blood relatives to stay with their adoptive families. Another 30, located while they were still young, have been returned to their biological families, sometimes following lengthy legal disputes.

Acting on tip-offs from suspicious neighbours or professionals such as doctors and teachers, the grandmothers have even posed as domestic staff to access the households where they believed an abducted child was. They then presented what evidence they could to a court, demanding blood tests be carried out on the child and compared with data held in a blood bank set up by the organisation, which contains samples from all those searching for a missing grandchild.

Among those who undertook such detective work was Elsa Pavón. Her daughter Monica Logares and son-in-law Claudio – both members of the Peronist youth movement – were seized by security forces on May 18, 1978, together with their daughter, Paula, who was just a few days short of her second birthday. Two years later, a snapshot of Paula was sent anonymously to the grandmothers with a note telling them the child was being raised by a senior police officer and his wife.

"At first I did not recognise my granddaughter in the photograph. It was too painful. I always thought that, wherever she was, Paula must be with her parents. So the photograph seemed like evidence that my daughter was dead," Elsa, 62, recalls. Elsa's desperation to trace Paula drove her to disguise herself as a domestic worker shopping for daily groceries in a store beside the house where Paula was being held. "I got to know the neighbours and caught glimpses of the child. I recognised her immediately. She looked exactly like her mother at that age."

It was not until democracy was restored in 1983 that Elsa could apply for a blood test to be carried out on the child. When the test, a year later, proved that the girl was her granddaughter, a judge ruled that she should be returned to live with Elsa. Paula was already eight years old. "At first it was very hard. She did not want to come to me," says Elsa. "She said I was trying to break up her family." But then the grandmother described to the young girl very gently how her father used to take her on his shoulders and point out the moon and the stars and how she used to call him "Calio" because she was too young to pronounce his name, Claudio.

Paula went very quiet. She repeated the name Calio three times. The third time her voice reverted to the high-pitched tone of infancy and she fell asleep for a short while. When she woke up she said she would agree to live with her grandmother as long as Elsa promised to buy her favourite comic every week.

Children like Paula, who were returned to their real families at a young age, seem to have accepted the truth about their traumatic pasts. This is not the case for those in their teens and early 20s who have discovered only recently that they were abducted. In addition to the 50 children so far traced, a further six young adults are the subject of bitter court disputes. They are refusing to take DNA tests to establish their true identity. Some are now living abroad, beyond the jurisdiction of the Argentine courts.

One of the most recent cases is that of Evelyn, 21, believed to be the granddaughter of Inocencia Pegoraro, 73. For two decades she has lived just over a mile away from Inocencia's home in Mar del Plata. Policarpo Vázquez, a naval intelligence officer, now in jail awaiting trial on kidnapping charges, admits Evelyn is not his real daughter. Evelyn is refusing to take a blood test. "Despite all the years of searching, it is these days of waiting that seem the longest," says Inocencia. "I lost Susana when she was 21. This girl is 21 now. I feel as if my daughter were about to return from the dead."

"The aim of the military, through abducting babies and annihilating their real identities, was to institute a form of state terrorism that would operate over three generations," says Dardo Tumas, a psychologist who worked for several years for the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. "In some instances, the abductions have had the desired effect – children have renounced their real families when their identities are re-established."

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Details of the abduction of 14 minors – including Javier – form key evidence in the pending trials of the eight senior military officials charged with carrying out a systematic policy of abducting the babies of female prisoners. Others arrested along with former president Videla are retired admiral Emilio Massera, the military's chief ideologue; Hector Febres, a coastguard officer; José Suppicich and Rubén Franco, both former admirals; Cristino Nicolaides, the former army head; Jorge Acosta, the former head of intelligence at the Esma; and Benito Bignone, the country's last military dictator.

Both Massera and Videla, previously sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes committed during the ⟶

dirty war, were freed, together with dozens of other military officers, under an amnesty introduced by Carlos Menem in 1990 after he became president. Fearing they would never see justice done through the Argentine courts, some families of the disappeared started legal proceedings abroad, in countries where they had family links, such as Spain, Italy and Germany. In Spain, their cause was taken up by Báltasar Garzón – the judge who later expanded his investigation to include crimes committed against Spanish citizens in Chile, which led to the appeal for Augusto Pinochet to be extradited from Britain. Garzón initiated proceedings against 120 former Argentine officers. Some believe it was only to fend off any attempt to extradite these officers to Spain that the Argentine courts decided to prosecute senior military figures on the few charges that were not included in Menem's amnesty.

Some think there is little political will to see the men brought to justice. That they are being held under house arrest does little to dispel this impression. The fact that others convicted of vile crimes during the dirty war now walk free also outrages the families of their victims. In March this year, sipping bitter coffee and reading a newspaper in a fashionable restaurant near the Esma, Alfredo Astíz, known by inmates in the former torture centre as the Blond Angel of Death, showed irritation at being asked what he had to say about the abduction of babies born to mothers at the camp. "My personal politics do not allow me to talk to journalists," he repeated over and over.

Not content with leaving matters to the courts, the younger generation of surviving relatives of the disappeared have formed an organisation called Hijos (children). Every month they target military officers who have been amnestied for their crimes and stage demonstrations outside their homes. They carry posters bearing the faces of the disappeared and chant: "*Alerta! Alerta! Alerta los vecinos! Al lado de tus casas esta viviendo un asesino!*" ("Alert! Alert! Alert to all the neighbours! Beside your houses lives an assassin!")

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Tucked away on a quiet street in the city of Rosario, a busy grain port on the River Plata, 190 miles northwest of Buenos Aires, nothing marks out the house where Jimena Vicario, 23, lives with her grandmother, Darwinia Gallichio. Yet visitors regularly knock on their door and ask: "Is this where the 'disappeared' girl lives?" "I tell them they've made a mistake and point them to a house further down the block," says Jimena.

Jimena has good reason to be wary. Ten years ago she became a cause célèbre when a judge ordered that she go to live with her grandmother. Television cameras captured her sobbing, "Let me stay with my mommy, please!" and threatening to commit suicide if she was forced to leave the woman she had grown up to regard as her mother. The woman, Susan Siciliano, had adopted Jimena when she was eight months old, after police brought the baby to the orphanage where she worked with a sign round her neck saying: "They killed my parents today. They were subversives." Jimena's parents were Stella Gallichio and Juan Carlos Vicario, psychology students and members of the students' union at the National University of Rosario. They planned to emigrate to Barcelona with their baby daughter as the military repression worsened. Stella Gallichio was arrested with her baby at the passport offices in Buenos Aires on February 5, 1977. Her husband was arrested two days later. They were never heard of again.

Following a tip to the authorities after the restoration of democracy in 1983, Stella's mother learnt that her granddaughter was living with Siciliano under the name of Romina Paola. It took six years of legal proceedings to get her granddaughter back.

The courtroom scenes surrounding the child's return temporarily turned the tide of public opinion against returning children of the disappeared to their biological families. Even now, Jimena finds it painful to talk about that time. "I knew I was adopted, so at first I was happy to discover my real family. But then I had to go to the tribunal, and there a psychologist told me the only reason my real mother had had me was because she was a terrorist and she could hide bombs in my pram. I became very afraid.

"Then they put a policeman to guard me while the court was deciding what to do. That lasted for five years. I lost all my friends because nobody wanted to invite me to their home and have a policeman come too... I was 13 when I came to live with my grandmother, but then I was ordered by the court to pay a visit every weekend to the woman who had brought me up... She accused my grandmother of turning me into a prostitute and demanded I have vaginal examinations. Up until that point my relations with her had been good. But then I was in the middle of a tug of war." Jimena wrote a letter to the court pleading that she not be forced to see Siciliano again, and the visits stopped.

That Jimena will not use Siciliano's name and refuses to repeat the name she was given by the orphanage worker are the only discernible chinks in the emotional armour she has constructed. "I do not want to look back. I want to go where nobody knows my past." Jimena, a hospital worker, dreams of emigrating to the United States to work for a big advertising company. "Here I am regarded as an exotic insect, like some sort of freak, because of what happened."

She hugs me at the end of our meeting and wanders off into the crowd of afternoon shoppers, and I remember the psychologist Dardo Tumas's words: "What the military did was introduce a poison that continues to seep through this society." It is a poison that will fester in its victims for the rest of their lives ■