

From *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*, edited by Paul Rogat Loeb, which got named the #3 political book of August 2004 by the History Channel and American Book Association See www.theimpossible.org

RESISTING TERROR

Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall

Berlin, 1943: "Let Our Husbands Go!"

On February 27, 1943, SS soldiers and Gestapo agents began seizing the remaining Jews of Berlin. They loaded them onto trucks and took them to an administration building at Rosenstrasse 2-4, in the heart of the city. The goal was finally to make the city *judenfrei* (free of Jews), through forcible collection of Jews with German spouses and mixed ancestry children. These Jews had previously escaped the Holocaust because they or their spouses were essential for the war effort. But the military defeat at Stalingrad had led Hitler to call for "Total War" against all Jews as well as Allied armies.

Before long a group of non-Jewish wives gathered on the Rosenstrasse with food and other items for their Jewish husbands who were inside. Soon they began demanding their spouses' release. One woman's brother, a soldier on leave, approached an SS guard and said, "If my brother-in-law is not released, I will not return to the front." The crowds grew, with women waiting outside day and night, holding hands and chanting "Let our husbands go!" By the second day, over 600 women were keeping a vigil.

Hitler had always sidestepped domestic opposition, and until this point the regime had largely managed to keep the genocide against the Jews a secret. But now that secrecy was jeopardized. Berlin – never a city enthusiastic about the Nazis -- was the German base for foreign news organizations that still operated during the war. If political malcontents or the wire services were to get wind of the protest, the myth of omnipotent Nazi control could be fractured.

By the third day SS troops were ordered to train their guns on the crowd but fire only warning shots. That scattered the women to nearby alleyways, but they returned. Jailing the women would have been the rankest hypocrisy: According to Nazi theories, women were intellectually incapable of political action. So women dissenters were the last thing the Nazis wanted Germans to hear about.

The crowd soon expanded to include people not in mixed marriages, bulging to a thousand, with people taunting SS soldiers. To stop more from arriving, Joseph Goebbels closed down the nearest streetcar station, but women walked a mile from another station. By the end of the week Goebbels saw no alternative but to let the prisoners go. Some thirty-five Jewish men, already sent to Auschwitz, were ordered to board a passenger train back to Berlin.

Without fully realizing what they had done, the Rosenstrasse women had forced the Nazis to make a choice: They could pay a finite cost -- 1,700 prisoners set free, if all the intermarried Jewish men were released. Or they could open a Pandora's box of opposition in the center of the capital and brutalize German women in the bargain. For the Nazis, maintaining social control was more important. The regime that terrorized Europe found itself unable to use violence against a challenge on its very doorstep.

As it happened, many more than thirty-five Jewish men were eventually set free. Adolf Eichmann's deputy in Paris wanted to know what he should do about intermarried Jews. On May 21 they were all released, everywhere in Europe, from the camps. Five years earlier Mohandas Gandhi had been asked about the Nazis. "Unarmed men, women and children offering nonviolent resistance," he predicted, "will be a novel experience for them."

In February 1943 Ruth Gross was a ten-year-old girl who went down to the Rosenstrasse so she could glimpse her father, one of the men interned there. One day she saw him, and he waved back. "This thing with Rosenstrasse," she said years later, "that was always a bond between us, my father and me." When she would visit him in the hospital at the end of his life, each time she left he would stand up and wave at her. "I have always been convinced, that he too was always thinking about this scene there on Rosenstrasse. About how he stood there and waved." When love comes to rescue life, no one forgets.

Buenos Aires, 1977: "We Will Walk Until We Drop"

On the first day, there were only fourteen -- an improbable troop of women in their middle years, anonymous and ordinary, not knowing whether the gray hand of authority would crush them or merely brush them away. Through the low light of that autumn afternoon, they filed across the stone paths of the city's most historic square, collecting near the obelisk erected to celebrate the nation's 19th century break with Spanish rule.

They had gone to the Plaza de Mayo, in the civic heart of Buenos Aires, on this last day of April 1977, in search of another kind of independence--freedom from an uncertainty more haunting than grief. "We arrived separately," recalled one of the women, Maria del Rosario de Cerruti. "We wore flat shoes so we could make a run for it if they came after us. To demonstrate in front of Government House was very dangerous." But they were linked as securely as climbers on a rock cliff by the rope line of what they had in common: All were mothers; all had children who had disappeared.

Not until two months later, after weekly demonstrations, were three mothers allowed to see the minister of the interior, a general who said he had a file with the names of the disappeared. But he did not know who had taken them; he said "that there were para-military groups out there who couldn't be controlled," Rosario recalled. "Then he said that perhaps our sons had run away with a woman, that perhaps our daughters were working as prostitutes somewhere."

At that moment, the women's fear gave way to anger. "We told him that they were cowards, because even a cruel dictator like Franco had signed the death sentences with his own hand . . . and we told him that we would come back every week until they gave us an answer and that we would walk in the square every Thursday until we dropped." Although they did not know it, these grieving women had declared war. The mothers' enemy was a military government whose roots reached back half a century, marked by several coups and only two free elections. When political repression spiked in the late 1960s, secret militias on the right were joined in the field by leftist counterparts,

and kidnappings and car bombs proliferated. In just one year, one rightist group murdered seventy intellectuals and lawyers.

In 1974, the army's hands were untied. With webs of spies and paramilitaries, the army fashioned a kind of clandestine armed service and managed to quench the violence. But a year later, when the nation tipped toward mayhem again, a new junta dissolved the congress, provincial governments, and the Supreme Court, forbade political or trade union activity, and made civilians subject to trial by military courts.

The goal was to obliterate subversion, and this meant all-out war--a dirty war, using any means. In every region covert detention centers were set up and special task forces were trained to capture and interrogate suspects. "First we will kill all the subversives," explained the military governor of Buenos Aires, "then we will kill their collaborators; then . . . those who remain indifferent; and finally we will kill the timid."

To do this, they simply made people disappear --into the forests and into the rivers and oceans, dropped from helicopters. In time, as many as 30,000 Argentines would disappear, and each disappearance was concealed and denied; survivors were left with only an empty place, as if the loved one had never existed.

Typically, a victim was taken by a squad of armed men in mufti, arriving in a fleet of blue Ford Falcons, which became their signature car. At first they worked only late at night, but as they smelled the fear rising around them, they began snatching people in broad daylight. People were disappeared because they were only a few degrees of separation from another disappeared person. The terror might favor the taking of journalists, academics, and politicians, but it also did not hesitate to seize ordinary men, women, and even children.

At first the mothers of the disappeared felt only numb loss. But as they realized that no one else would act, they began a melancholy migration from the world of their families and homes out onto Argentina's cold plains of political lawlessness. Yet the mothers sensed that they were not alone: If they had no one else, they had each other.

Ironically, this realization dawned as they came to sit in the Interior Ministry. There a policewoman would take down their names, addresses, the names of missing children, the names of their associates--names, the mothers realized too late, that would become grist for the mill of terror. Soon they had begun to share their unspeakable stories -- grief bound them into an association, a force.

Short on political experience, they nonetheless understood instinctively that the terror was sustained less by the junta's physical might than by the frightened stillness of victims' families. So, searching for a weapon they might raise against this enemy, they resolved to deny the junta what it most needed: silence.

"Our first problem was how we were going to organize meetings if we didn't know each other," recalled Dora de Bazze. "There were so many police and security men everywhere that you never knew who was standing next to you...So we carried different things so we could identify each other. For example one would hold a twig in her hand...one would pin a leaf to her lapel, anything to let us know this was a Mother."

The women also made signs that asked "Where are our disappeared children?" or declared "The military have taken our children." Dora de Bazze remembered that they "went out at night to stick them on the buses and underground trains . . . And we wrote messages on peso notes so that as many people as possible would see them . . . if a

journalist reported us, he disappeared; the television and radio were completely under military control.”

Azucena de Villaflor de De Vincente quickly emerged as the first leader. Her parents had been trade union leaders, but, once married, she had become a homemaker, never looking outward--until 1976, when her son, Néstor and his wife, Raquel, were disappeared. From that moment on she was a whirlwind, rallying the mothers, offering her home as a meeting place, organizing letter-writing campaigns to Amnesty International. It was she who suggested that they take their grievance into the bright light of the Plaza de Mayo.

“At first we didn't march together in the square,” remembered Maria del Rosario. “We sat on the benches with our knitting or stood in small groups . . . Then, when the police . . . began pointing their rifles at us and telling us to move on . . . we began to walk in twos around the edge of the square . . . There were so few of us we were hardly noticed and we had to make sure the public knew we existed. . . so we began to walk in the center of the square, around the monument.”

Eddying about on the plaza, they piled up belongings of disappeared children, and often they carried carpenter's nails to show their solidarity with the Holy Mother, whose son had also been detained and tortured to death. In September 1977 they decided to join an annual pilgrimage to Luján, thirty miles outside Buenos Aires, so they could tell their stories to strangers during the long walk. But how to identify themselves?

“Azucena's idea,” said Aida de Suárez, “was to wear as a head scarf one of our children's nappies, because every mother keeps something like this, which belonged to your child as a baby. It was very easy to spot the head scarves. . . so we decided to use the scarves at other meetings and then every time we went to Plaza de Mayo . . . and we embroidered on the names of our children. Afterwards we put on them ‘*Aparicion con Vida*’--literally, reappearance with life--“because we were no longer searching for just one child but for all the disappeared.”

By the last months of 1977, *las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* had grown from 14 reluctant housewives to about 150 protesting mothers, who were in touch with hundreds more. On October 5 of that first year, they managed to place a half-page Mother's Day advertisement in the newspaper *La Prensa*, addressed to the president of the Supreme Court, armed forces commanders, junta leaders, and the Church. A few weeks later they followed with a petition with 24,000 signatures, and the names of 537 *desparecidos*.

Around the world, news media and governments began to take notice. But as the mothers revealed what was wrong in Argentina, they became a target. “They started calling us ‘*las locas*’--the madwomen--recalled Aida de Suárez. “When . . . the foreign journalists began to ask about us, they used to say, ‘Don't take any notice of those old women, they're all mad.’ Of course they called us mad. How could the armed forces admit they were worried by a group of middle-aged women? And anyway we were mad. When everyone was terrorized we didn't stay at home crying--we went to the streets to confront them directly. We were mad but it was the only way to stay sane.”

According to Marina de Curia, the government had waited too long to take them seriously. “They didn't destroy us immediately because they thought we couldn't do anything and when they wanted to, it was too late. We were already organized.”

One day when the mothers were putting the final touches on their second advertisement, men appeared as if from nowhere and began hitting mothers and hauling

them away. Two days later Azucena was taken. The authorities thought that “by kidnapping the fourteen Mothers, they would destroy our movement,” Aida de Suarez said. “They didn't realize this would only strengthen our determination. We said, no, they're not going to destroy us, we will continue, stronger than ever. They thought we would be too afraid to go back to the square. It was difficult to go back . . . but we went back.”

Returning to the Plaza de Mayo, the mothers now understood that their once-spontaneous protest had become a strategic thrust. Where the generals had thrown a cape of legitimacy over their crimes, the mothers lifted it. Despite threats and kidnappings, they refused to submit. They were now, in their way, as unassailable as the regime had been, having shown an audacity in the face of what was thought to be unopposable.

Argentina hosted the World Cup of soccer in 1978, and at first, the mothers were forgotten in the excitement. But journalists who came to cover soccer were drawn to their weekly promenade. When Argentina won the World Cup, domestic television showed the generals in a throng of fans; on Dutch TV, there were *las madres*.

Having rebuked the regime at home, they proceeded to lacerate it abroad. Three of the mothers embarked on an international tour heralded by the simple statement “We are the Mothers of the disappeared from Buenos Aires, Argentina, and we are coming to discuss human rights.” They acquired a kind of celebrity, which tended to protect them: The famous, both they and the junta understood, are not easily disappeared.

Other human rights organizations in Argentina now sprang up in the mothers' wake. In August 1979 the Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo was formally registered. That same year the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights was able to visit Argentina and document illegal detention, torture, and disappearances, later condemning the regime.

Finally seams became visible within the junta, as the air force split from the army and navy. Tensions borne of fighting the Dirty War and maintaining a fictitious normality were now worsened by a collapsing economy. Yet another coup occurred, led by a hard-line general who decided to produce a splendid diversion. In March 1982 Argentine marines landed on the Falkland Islands (or *Malvinas*), a British possession claimed by Argentines. It was a ruinous miscalculation. Argentine forces were unceremoniously routed by a British naval armada dispatched by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Before another year elapsed, the control of Argentina passed to a constitutional, elected government.

For the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, this might have meant the end of a long, often lonely struggle. In fact, it was only a point of new departure. They now resisted the military's attempt to declare an amnesty for the malefactors of the Dirty War, declaring that their children's assassins had to face justice.

Today, the oldest survivors among the original mothers are in their seventies and eighties. Many still feel the effects of the days of marching, of beatings and detentions. But the force they fashioned became a permanent feature of the political landscape, as Argentine women, and aggrieved women elsewhere in Latin America, put on white scarves. In the twentieth century there was no better emblem of the fact that replacing fear with truth is the first step toward freedom.



Vaclav Havel said that those who acquiesce to a dictator's rule are "living a lie" and that when they begin to "live in the truth," it opens up "explosive, incalculable political power" in the society. To do that requires courage, especially when the ruler's authority is poised on the point of a bayonet.

Thirty years before *las madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, the non-Jewish wives of Jewish men being rounded up for the Holocaust stood for a week on the streets of Berlin and demanded their husbands' release. The Nazis' will to terrorize did not make them invulnerable: They were alarmed at protest at the seat of their power, and the cost of suppressing that -- though trifling in blood and time--was too high politically. So the evil they embodied was, in that place and at that moment, impotent.

Strutting narcissistically, the uniformed regimes of Germany and Argentina were confounded by unyielding groups of unpretentious women. There are perhaps no two stories in the long development of nonviolent conflict involving a starker contrast of opponents: storm troopers using terror and women without weapons.

History continues to show little correlation between the degree of a regime's brutality and its ability to maintain control. Throughout the 1990s, Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic had brought genocide to Bosnia, ethnic cleansing to Kosovo, and political oppression to his own people. But in the year 2000, a broad-based, nonviolent civilian movement, sparked initially by young students and unifying around a single new leader, prevented Milosevic from stealing an election and then forced him from power by subverting his control of his own police and military. The man who had been called "the butcher of the Balkans" was brought down without a single violent death.

Today one-quarter of the world is still held in subjection by rulers who refuse to listen to their own people. Their days are numbered, because, as Bishop Desmond Tutu has said, "when people decide they want to be free, there is nothing that can stop them" -- not the evil of any regime nor the terror it can inflict on a few. Resistance begins with a few. But it can end with liberation.

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