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THE LITTLE SCHOOL: Tales of Disappearance & Survival

Alicia Partnoy

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Introduction

In the summer of 1984, after four and a half years in exile, I returned to my homeland to mourn my friends who had disappeared or were killed by the military, to mourn the members of my family who had died during my ordeal of seven years in prison and banishment, and to suffer at the sight of my country ruined after years of dictatorship.

Almost 30,000 Argentines “disappeared” between 1976 and 1979, the most oppressive years of the military rule.

Military coups have not been rare events in the history of my country. In fact, I was born in 1955, the year of the coup that overthrew Juan Peron. A succession of military and short-lived civilian governments followed. It was not until I turned seventeen that Peronists were permitted to participate in Argentina’s political life. The Peronist party won the elections. How could a teenager who had never heard anything positive about Peronism from teachers or from the censored media get strongly involved in the movement? My “conversion,” as well as that of thousands of youth who had not come from Peronist families, was a gradual process. I grew up loving my country and its people and hating injustice. I did not have many doubts left when I learned that Peronism had given power to the workers by organizing them in strong unions; had improved the living conditions of people through fair wages, retirement plans, vacations, and a good public health system; and had granted women the right to vote. I also learned
about the work of Evita, Peron's wife, who was responsible for many of these gains. I knew that Peronism was a very broad movement and that under the umbrella of economic independence, political sovereignty and social justice, there was room for all ideologies. However, like most of the younger generation, I thought that the movement bore the seeds of change to socialism.

At my home town university in Bahía Blanca, I began to get involved. Our main goal was to change the concept of universities as "islands" for scholars who were not concerned with the country's reality. As a student, I worked with others to create programs that would meet what we perceived to be the needs of the Argentine people. I was elected student government representative and was active in the Peronist Youth Movement (*Juventud Universitaria Peronista*). One of my closest friends, Zulma "Vasca" Izurieta, who like myself majored in Literature, worked in a literacy campaign in one of the city's shanty towns. Some of my best friends were Christians who advocated Liberation Theology. The names of most of them are on lists of those who disappeared at the Little School.

By 1975, Peron had died, and Isabel, his third wife and Vice President, was left in charge. Unlike Evita, Isabel did not truly represent the interests of the workers. Furthermore, she handed over control of the repressive apparatus to the military. The youth movement was attacked as a threat to our country's security. Paramilitary groups kidnapped and killed political activists with the support of the police. At the same time the Montoneros, an urban guerrilla movement within Peronism, targeted members of the Armed Forces and big factory owners who were not complying with their
workers' demands. The Revolutionary People's Party (ERP), the second largest guerrilla movement, aimed at the same targets.

Finally, in March 1976, the military—along with the national oligarchy and backed by multinational corporations—launched a coup. The new junta heavily censored the media and annulled the constitution. They felt that this was the only way to control not only the youth but also the workers, whose demands for better wages and whose continuous strikes were getting out of hand.

Attending school became hazardous. I had to pass between two soldiers who were sitting with machine guns at the entrance of the building. A highly ranked officer would request my I.D., check it against a list of "wanted" activists and search my belongings. I did not know when my name was going to appear on that list. I stopped going to classes. But the coup triggered my rage, and I decided to become more militant. That decision meant risking my life. My daughter, Ruth, was nine months old. My answer to my own fears was that I had to work for a better society for the sake of my child's future. For almost a year I did so. I clandestinely reproduced and distributed information on the economic situation, the workers' strikes, and the repression.

I learned about "disappearance": the kidnapping of an individual followed by torture and secret detention, which meant that the military denied the fact that the prisoner was in their hands. I did not know that very soon I would become a disappeared person.

On January 12, 1977, at noon, I was detained by uniformed Army personnel at my home, Canadá Street 240, Apt. 2, Bahía Blanca; minutes later the same military personnel detained
my husband at his place of work. I was taken to the headquarters of the 5th Army Corps and from there to a concentration camp, which the military ironically named the Little School (*La Escuelita*). We had no knowledge of the fate of Ruth, our daughter. From that moment on, for the next five months, my husband and I became two more names on the endless list of disappeared people.

The old house of the Little School was located behind the headquarters of the 5th Army Corps, fifteen blocks from the You and I Motel (*Tü y Yö*) on Carrindanga Road, a beltway. The house was near a railroad; one could hear trains, the shots fired at the army command's firing range, and the mooing of cows. I stepped off the Army truck, handcuffed and blindfolded, and by tilting my head, was able to read on the face of the house the letters A.A.A., which stood for *Alianza Anticomunista Argentina*, the name of a parapolice group with whom the military has since denied any relation.

In the Little School there were two rooms where an average of fifteen prisoners remained prone, our hands bound. The floors were wood, the walls yellowing with high windows and dark green shutters and Colonial wrought iron bars. Separating these rooms was a tiled hall where the presence of a guard insured that we neither moved nor spoke. At the end of the hall were the guards' room, a kitchen and a bathroom. A door opened on the patio, where the "torture room," latrine and water tank were located. There was also a trailer where the guards slept; and later they added one or two trailers for more "disappeared" people.

When it rained, the water streamed into the rooms and soaked us. When the temperature fell below zero, we were covered with only dirty blankets; when the heat was
unbearable, we were obligated to blanket even our heads. We were forced to remain silent and prone, often immobile or face down for many hours, our eyes blindfolded and our wrists tightly bound.

Lunch was at 1:00 P.M. and dinner at 7:00 P.M.; we went without food for eighteen consecutive hours daily. We were constantly hungry. I lost 20 pounds, going down to 95 pounds (I am 5 ft. 5 in.). Added to the meager food, the lack of sugar or fruits, was the constant state of stress that made our bodies consume calories rapidly. We ate our meals blindfolded, sitting on the bed, plate in lap. When we had soup or watery stew, the blows were constant because the guards insisted that we keep our plates straight. When we were thirsty, we asked for water, receiving only threats or blows in response. For talking, we were punished with blows from a billy jack, punches, or removal of our mattresses. The atmosphere of violence was constant. The guards put guns to our heads or mouths and pretended to pull the trigger.

On April 25, after three and a half months, the guards told me they were taking me “to see how the radishes grow”—a euphemism for death and burial. Instead, I was transferred from the Little School to another place where I remained disappeared for fifty-two more days. The living conditions were better: no blindfold, no blows, better food, a clean cell, daily showers. The isolation was complete and the risk of being killed the same. By June, 1977, my family was informed of my whereabouts. I “re-appeared” but remained a political prisoner for two and a half more years. I could see my daughter, and I knew that my husband had also survived.

I never discovered why the military had spared my life. My parents, who knocked at every door looking for me, might
have knocked at the correct door. Yet it is also true that some of the most influential people in the country were not able to rescue their own children. My degree of involvement was not the reason for my luck either. People who participated less in politics did not survive. We were hostages and, as such, our lives were disposed of according to the needs of our captors.

While I was imprisoned, no charges were brought against me. Like the majority of the 7,000 political prisoners, I was held indefinitely and considered to be a threat to national security. It is estimated that over 30,000 people “disappeared” to detention centers like the Little School. Among them were over 400 children who were either kidnapped with their parents or—like Graciela’s baby—born in captivity. All but a few of the disappeared still remain unaccounted for.

Human rights groups launched an international campaign denouncing the repression in Argentina. One of these was the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo movement, an organization of mothers of disappeared people that demanded answers from the government on the whereabouts of their children. These women soon became targets of repression, and several members disappeared.

Domestic and international pressure forced the junta to free a number of political prisoners. In 1979, after the Organization of American States sent a fact finding mission to Argentina, I was released and forced to leave the country. President Carter’s human rights policy had also helped. Since some of us were granted U.S. visas and refugee status, the junta knew the United States wanted the release of prisoners.

By Christmas, 1979, I was taken directly from jail to the airport, where I was reunited with my daughter. Some hours
later we flew to the United States. My husband had come two months before.

A short time after my arrival, I started to work on behalf of the remaining prisoners and the disappeared ones. I soon learned more about the widespread use of disappearance as a tool for repression in Latin America. As a survivor, I felt my duty was to help those suffering injustice.

By the middle of 1983 the dictatorship collapsed. The junta could not withstand the impact of strikes, demonstrations, international pressure, a chaotic economy, and fights within the military after their defeat in the Malvinas/Falklands war. In December a democratically elected president was inaugurated.

When I went back to Argentina in the summer of 1984, lawsuits had been filed against those who had taken part in the bloody repression. Hundreds of unidentified corpses were being exhumed, most of them with signs of torture. The Little School had been leveled, but the site was identified through information provided by several survivors, including myself. I testified before the judge temporarily assigned to the case of the Little School. I also testified before the Commission (CONADEP)* appointed to investigate disappearance. Despite overwhelming evidence, one year later only two military leaders, General Jorge Videla and Admiral Emilio Massera, have been given life sentences for their part in the disappearance of almost 30,000 people. Only three others have been convicted, and four military leaders were acquitted of all charges. The rest of the criminals enjoy freedom. It is true that a very important trial has taken place against the generals who presided over the country, the men responsible for the massive assassinations. But it is also true that not until justice

*Argentine Commission for the Investigation of Disappearances
is brought in cases like that of the Little School will there be a safeguard against the recurrence of these crimes in the future.

This past summer I met Adrianita, the daughter of Graciela and Raul. When her grandparents visited the authorities to request information about their children, this girl, then four years old, furiously pounded the table and demanded: “Sir, give me back my parents and my little brother!” Adrianita calls me Aunt. I was reunited with Vasca and Graciela’s mother, who told me that even though she does not have any daughters left, she still has me. The voices of my friends at the Little School grew stronger in my memory. By publishing these stories I feel those voices will not pass unheard. I asked my mother, who is an artist, to illustrate this book. Her suffering during the years of repression has given her the tools to show this terrible reality in her powerful drawings.

Today, while sharing this part of my experience, I pay tribute to a generation of Argentines lost in an attempt to bring social change and justice. I also pay tribute to the victims of repression in Latin America. I knew just one Little School, but throughout our continent there are many “schools” whose professors use the lessons of torture and humiliation to teach us to lose the memories of ourselves. Beware: in little schools the boundaries between story and history are so subtle that even I can hardly find them.

Washington D.C.
December, 1985
That day, at noon, she was wearing her husband's slippers; it was hot and she had not felt like turning the closet upside down to find her own. There were enough chores to be done in the house. When they knocked at the door, she walked down the ninety-foot corridor, flip-flop, flip-flop. For a second she thought that perhaps she should not open the door; they were knocking with unusual violence...but it was noon time. She had always waited for them to come at night. It felt nice to be wearing a loose house dress and his slippers after having slept so many nights with her shoes on, waiting for them.

She realized who was at the door and ran towards the backyard. She lost the first slipper in the corridor, before reaching the place where Ruth, her little girl, was standing. She lost the second slipper while leaping over the brick wall. By then the shouts and kicks at the door were brutal. Ruth
burst into tears in the doorway. While squatting in the bushes, she heard the shot. She looked up and saw soldiers on every roof. She ran to the street through weeds as tall as she. Suddenly the sun stripped away her clothing; it caught her breath. When the soldiers grabbed her, forcing her into the truck, she glanced down at her feet in the dry street dust; afterward she looked up: the sky was so blue that it hurt. The neighbors heard her screams.

The floor of the truck was cool, but the tiles at Army Headquarters were still cooler. She walked that room a thousand times from one end to the other until they came to take her. Through a peep hole under her blindfold she could see her feet on the tiny black and white tiles, the stairs, the corridor. Then came the trip to the Little School.

At the concentration camp kitchen they made a list of her belongings. "What for, if you are going to steal them all?" she asked.

"A wedding ring, a watch... dress color... bra... she doesn't wear one... shoes... she doesn't have any."

"She doesn't? It doesn't matter, she won't have to walk much." Loud guffaws.

She was not paying attention to what they were saying. She did try to guess how many of them there were. When she thought the interrogation session was about to begin, they took her to a room. She walked down a tiled corridor, then an old wooden floor. After arriving at the wretched bed assigned to her, she discovered a ragged blanket. She used it to cover her feet and did not feel so helpless.

The following morning someone tapped her on the shoulder and made her stand up. Someone had re-tied her
blindfold during the night. The peep hole was smaller but still big enough for her to be able to see the floor: blood on the tiles next to a spot of sky blue. They made her walk on the bloodstains; she tried not to avoid them so they would not notice that she could see.

While they opened the iron grate into the corridor, she thought for a minute of the sky blue spot. She could have sworn that it was a very familiar color, like the sky blue color of her husband’s pants. It was the same sky blue of his pants; it was him, lying on the hall floor, wounded. Her heart shrunk a little more until it was hard as a stone. “We must be tough,” she thought, “otherwise they will rip us to shreds.” Fear carved an enormous hole in her stomach when she stepped down onto the cement floor of the “machine” room and saw the side of the metal framed bed like those used for torture.

She does not remember exactly the day it all happened. In any event, she already knew by then something about the pace of life at the Little School. She knew, for example, that after mealtimes, if they were allowed to sit for a short while on the edge of the bed, she could, without being caught, whisper a few words out of the side of her mouth to Vasquita, who was in the bunk next to hers. She chose the words.

“Vasca,” she called out.

“Yes…”

“They gave me some slippers with only one flower.”

“At last.”

“Did you understand me? Just one flower, two slippers and just one flower.”

Vasca stretched her neck and lifted up her face to peek under her blindfold. The flower, a huge plastic daisy, looked
up at them from the floor. The other slipper, without flower, was more like them. But that one-flowered slipper amid the dirt and fear, the screams and the torture, that flower so plastic, so unbelievable, so ridiculous, was like a stage prop, almost obscene, absurd, a joke.

Vasca smiled first and then laughed. It was a nervous and barely restrained laughter. If she were caught laughing, it was going to be very hard to explain what was so funny. Then blows would come, with or without explanations.

She shuffled the daisy around for more than a hundred days, from the latrine to the bed, from the bed to the shower. Many times she blindly searched under the bed for the daisy in between the guards' shouts and blows.

The day she was transferred to prison, someone realized that she should be wearing “more decent” shoes. They found her a pair of tennis shoes three sizes too big. The one-flowered slippers remained at the Little School, disappeared...
Last time I heard my full name it was at Army headquarters, the evening of the day I was kidnapped. The military man repeated it in a calm and even joyful voice. Meanwhile I could hear the sound of a typewriter in the room. It was the first time I was wearing my blindfold.

"Name?"
"Alicia Partnoy."
"Age?"
"Twenty-one years old."
"Alias?"
"None."

The truth was that, while doing political work, I seldom used my real name. The day Graciela, Zulma's sister, was arrested we all changed our aliases. In my particular case it was not necessary because Graciela knew my name, my parents' address, my history. If she spoke under torture, no
change of nicknames would have saved me. But she did not speak. Zulma says that Chamamé told her Graciela had been heavily tortured. But she did not speak.

I left my house for some days, just as a precaution. I named myself Rosa. Sometimes the whole affair of the alias seemed ridiculous. Giving it some thought I decided the aliases were probably okay in a little town, where everybody knows everybody else, where there is just one Gumersindo, one Pascual... but how do you find an Alicia in a city of hundreds of Alicas, a Carlos among thousands? We learned slowly. Each pebble of information helped create the avalanche that would crush the rest of our friends: the color of the hair, the inflection of the voice, the texture of the hands, the name, the nickname... details. By the time of my own avalanche, I was Rosa. When they came to arrest me, I didn’t know whether they were coming for Rosa or Alicia, but it was for me that they came.

At the Little School I don’t have a last name. Only Vasca calls me by my name. The guards have repeatedly said that numbers will be used to call us, but so far that has been just a threat.

The day we took our third shower—I had already been here for almost two months—a guard was bringing me back from the bathroom; my long hair was wet under the white blindfold, my dress still torn from the leap over the backyard wall, my hands tied, my bones sticking out of my cheeks and elbows... I suddenly heard a guard singing a folk tune:

"Should treacherous Death
harness me to her hitching post
please use two horse whips to make me
a cross for my headboard.
Should treacherous Death..."

Since that moment they have called me Death. Maybe that is why every day, when I wake up, I say to myself that I, Alicia Partnoy, am still alive.
Benja’s First Night

They gave us quince jam and cheese today, a small piece. I saved the cheese: there were too many good things together. I’d been dreaming of something sweet for so many days! But not this way... When the guards give us a “treat” they say it is to “celebrate” the capture of new prisoners. There was also music today, the radio blasting, to screen the cries. Now Benja is standing by my bunk bed. The guard has tied his hands to the end of my bed. I remember his untied hands setting free all those leaflets on the streets of Bahía Blanca, his easy laughter and childish face, his deeply furrowed brow when we discussed politics. We called him Benja because, like the Benjamin of Biblical story, he was the youngest of the group. We never got to know each other very well, a few meetings... I think the two of us once wrote together on a wall: “Down with the military killers. We shall overcome!”
This afternoon when they took us to the latrine, I overheard a guard say, "Hang them upside down." It must have been the torture well where they dunk prisoners in putrid water for hours on end...Poor little Benja! Now he looks so helpless, naked, his ribs sticking out. I'm sure he's hungry. He must have already been standing at the foot of my bed for over an hour. It's midnight now. By stretching my feet I can touch his frozen hands...I wish I could protect him. Just a kid! The guard has already entered the room twice to torment Benja, saying he is bored and wants to "box a little."

I have some cheese and a small end of bread saved for tomorrow...If I cut them into little pieces, then put them between my toes, I can pass the bread and cheese to Benja. The blanket is covering my feet; the guard won't see me. It's too bad I didn't save the quince jam! I cautiously stretch my leg to reach his hands; he bends his head over his tied hands and chews carefully. I've already told him there isn't any more.

"Sir," Vasca calls, "Sir..."
Abuelo strides into the room.
"Can I have some water?"
He leaves and comes back with the water jug.
"Sir," Benja calls out, "Can I have some water?" My bed shakes and I hear a strangled moan.
"Do you want water? Take this!" Another punch. I wish this coward was beating me instead. Now he leaves the room. I can smell the smoke of a cigarette he has lighted. It will last five minutes and then...The smoke is in this room...I'm sure he's coming on his tiptoes so we won't hear. My bed
shakes again and my whole body contracts in rage and impotence... Something must be done... I have to think of something to stop this. The guard feels almighty, yet for some reason I believe he's afraid: deep down he must have some memory of justice. But that's not what matters now; what really matters is that he stop beating Benja...

The break lasts a little bit longer this time. Now, I hear him coming again. Through the peep hole in my blindfold I can see his shirt: "Sir," I call out, raising my voice so he doesn't suspect I can see him.

"What do you want?" I pretend to be startled at his quick answer.

"Is there any bread left?"

"No." Patichoti, who quickly catches on, says, "Sir, I have some bread left. Can I give it to her?"

He, Patichoti, has some bread left! I can't believe it! In the morning after the change of guards, we'll do the same thing to return Patichoti's bread. Right now the main thing is to make time pass, to delay the blow... It must be 4:00 A.M.

When the guard brings me the piece of bread, I suddenly tell him, "I bet I can arm wrestle with you and win." I bend my arm, my hand open, my other arm almost glued to this one because today my wrists are tied on a short string. I wait for a slap that doesn't come. Abuelo places his elbow alongside mine and squeezes my hand. Lying on the bunk, I press my feet against the bed's iron frame. I know I have good abdominal muscles and that will help me. As tense as an arrow, I clench my teeth in yet another last effort... I've won! This dude can't believe it either, and he wants to try again...
The second round was hard for him, but he's easily won the third. It seems that he's already bored and doesn't want to take a fourth chance. My arm is rather sore—a month has gone by without physical activity. But... What's he doing now? He's leaving. Let's see for how long.

An hour has passed. The guard approaches my bed again, and, luckily, starts boasting: "You thought you were going to win!"

"Let's have a return match!"

He accepts; the motherfucker's tired of boxing. Damn him, why doesn't he fall asleep like Pato, who guzzles down a lot of booze and drops dead? But this one... Two more rounds of wrestling. I can't feel my arm but I don't care... Well! He's won the third one. He's leaving now. Outside, I can hear the sounds of the early morning, the roosters and cows on a nearby farm. Peine brings Abuelo some coffee. They chat for a few minutes and now Abuelo is coming back. For God's sake! How long is this going to last? The guard screams to Benja: "Stand properly!" He unties Benja's hands and makes him lie on the bottom bed. While I take a deep breath, I can almost hear my friend's bones pushing one another, finding their places in his body.

The guard goes to the iron grate and shakes it. He shouts: "Corridor." The door opens and closes immediately. The guards switch posts. It's 7:00 A.M.; a new day has just begun at the Little School.
Telepathy

Whether it was for better or worse that telepathy didn’t work, I still can’t tell. I tried it several times. My main goal was to get in touch with my family. However, it could have had unlimited applications. The first time I tried it was the day we ate a slice of meat and a potato for supper. The dish, an exquisite combination that deserved a better setting, slid down my digestive tract with astonishing speed. So it was probably hunger that triggered my curiosity for the extrasensory world. I started by relaxing my muscles. I thought that my mind, relieved of its weight, would travel in the direction I wanted. But the experiment failed. I was expecting that my psyche, lifted to the ceiling, would be able to observe my body lying on a mattress striped with red and filth. It didn’t happen quite that way. Perhaps my mind’s eyes were blindfolded, too.
The following day I tried again. It was in the afternoon, after I woke up alarmed because I couldn't remember where I had left my child for her nap. I opened my eyes to a blindfold that had already been there for twenty days. That reaction made me realize that at the edges of my mind I still believed I was free.

If only I could reach further. If I wanted, I could find a way to control my mind, to make it travel, escape, leave. It was an order. I received so many orders:

*Sit down! Lie down! On your stomach! Hurry up!* I needed to summon my brain: *Come on! Take off! Get out!* I had a mission. Anyway it was probably better that my mind didn't obey me. Had it followed my orders, I would have sent my mind to find out what my future held, and when it returned to inform me of the number of bullets it had found in my corpse, I would not have had any peace. I didn't have any peace now either, just the hope that there still remained a share of air for me to breathe in a future freedom.

I made my third attempt at telepathy this afternoon. I used another method. I tried to imagine my parents' house on Uruguay Street: my mother and her paintings in the small back room, my father making tea in the kitchen, my brother bent over a book. The sunlight...the trees in the backyard. "I'm okay," I repeated in my mind. "I'm alive. I'm alive. I'm still alive." Closing my eyes tightly, making a fist with my hands, gritting my teeth, I said, "I'm okay. Listen, I'm okay." My mom continued painting, daddy stirred his tea and Daniel turned one more page in his book. In the backyard the trees swayed. I didn't see any of them: it was just the imagination. They did not hear me either. My feet tickled with an urge to run away.
I guess it was at that point that I opened my eyes. Through a peep hole in my blindfold I saw Hugo's legs; Bruja had just brought him back from the shower. He was wearing a dress, to the amusement of Loro, who guffawed at the sight of Hugo trying to climb into his bunk bed. A while later they brought another prisoner dressed in a lady's nightgown. The guards said that there weren't any more pants left. I couldn't continue my telepathy exercise because of the laughter and humiliation clinging to the air like an annoying smell. In any case, I had been unable to get through.

Then I suddenly realized that for a short time I'd had the certain knowledge that one of my grandfathers had just died.
Appendix:
Cases of the Disappeared
at the Little School

January-April 1977

The case of Graciela Alicia Romero de Metz and Raul Eugenio Metz:

Graciela was arrested on December 16, 1976 in Cutral Co (Neuquén) along with her husband, Raul Eugenio Metz. Heavily armed individuals broke into their home, also threatening the neighbors. Both were 24 years old at the time of their detention. They had one daughter, Adrianita, who was two or three years old; once detained, they received no news of her fate. Graciela was five months pregnant at the time, and during the transfer by truck to Neuquén she was tortured with electric shocks to her stomach and hit brutally.

Later they were both transferred to the Little School, and were already there at the time of my arrival on January 12th. Raul was forced to remain prone on the floor, hands tied behind his back. Towards the end of January he was taken, according to the guards, to Neuquén. A writ of habeas corpus was requested. His name is registered in Amnesty International's list of disappeared people.

Graciela stayed at the Little School, forced to remain
prone, blindfolded and handcuffed like the rest. In the last month of her pregnancy she was permitted “exercise”—blindfolded walks around a table, holding on to the edge. A few days before giving birth they took her to a trailer on the patio. On April 17 she had a son—normally, but without medical assistance. I persistently asked the guards to let me help her or keep her company, but they didn’t allow me. She was helped by the guards. On April 23 she was removed from the Little School and I never heard of her again. She is on Amnesty International’s list of disappeared people. Her son, according to the guards, was given to one of the interrogators.

*The case of Zulma “Vasca” Aracelli Izurieta and her companion, César Antonio “Braco” Giordiano:*

Vasca, 24 years old, and Braco, 18 years old, were detained in Córdoba around the first week of December, 1976. They were at the concentration camp La Perla and in the early days of January were transferred by a military airplane to Bahía Blanca. Chiche was the officer in charge of this operation. On April 12, 1977, after more than four months in detention they were made to bathe and put on their own clothing; the guards gave Vasca back her bracelets and told them that they would be taken to jail. I was in the same room as Vasca and María Elena Romero (who was also taken that night). The nurse came later and changed my room assignment. In my new room, I found Braco and Benja (companions of Vasca and María Elena, respectively). I listened as they were injected with anesthesia—the guards joked about it and I could hear the deep and rhythmic breathing of those who are asleep. The guards wrapped them in blankets and took them away. The next day, April 13, 1977, the two couples appeared in
La Nueva Provincia, the daily newspaper of Bahía Blanca, as having been killed in a “confrontation” with military forces in a house in General Cerri near Bahía Blanca.

The case of María Elena Romero and Gustavo Marcelo “Benja” Yoti:

María Elena and Benja were arrested on February 6, 1977 at their home by plainclothesmen who were heavily armed. Both were 17 years old. María Elena was Graciela Romero’s sister. Both María Elena and Benja were taken from the Little School the night of April 12th and shot.

The case of Nancy Cereijo, Stella María Ianarelli, Carlos María “Batata” Ilaqua and Hugo Daniel Lovfall:

Arrested on February 2, 1977 in Bahía Blanca, Carlos and Hugo were taken by army personnel in uniform. Both were 18 years old. They were born in Punta Alta, located near Bahía Blanca. Stella María worked at the Savoy Candy Shoppe in Bahía Blanca.

Carlos and Hugo were severely tortured. Guards dislocated Carlos’ shoulder during torture by hanging him by the arms in a well of water. During the afternoon of April 13, all of them were transferred, along with Elizabeth Freres and María Angélica Ferrari. When the guards took me to the bathroom that day at noon, I could see under my blindfold the feet of the six prisoners, who were seated along a narrow passageway. I never heard of them again.

The case of María Angélica Ferrari:

María was arrested at the end of January 1977 in the small town of Ingeniero White—near Bahía Blanca. She was
26 years old when she was arrested and was studying biochemistry at the National University of the South (Universidad Nacional del Sur). On April 13, 1977, she was taken away from the Little School.

**The case of Elizabeth Freres:**

Elizabeth was arrested at the end of January 1977 in Bahía Blanca. She was 24 years old when she was arrested. She was studying biochemistry at the National University of the South. On April 13, after two and a half months at the Little School, she was taken away. On about April 16, I heard a newscast on the guards’ radio, which reported the killing of two couples in a confrontation in La Plata. As the announcer began to list the names, we listened for Elizabeth’s name. We heard her first name, but before hearing her last name, the guards turned off the radio.

**The case of the high school students:**

When I arrived at the Little School, there were approximately a dozen teenagers about 17 years old; all of them were students at the National School of Technical Education in Bahía Blanca. They had been kidnapped from their homes in the presence of their parents, in the second half of December 1976. Some stayed at the Little School for one month. There they were beaten harshly and had to lie on the floor with their hands tied behind their backs. At least two were tortured with electric shocks. An incident in which they disobeyed a professor led to their kidnapping: The students were finishing classes and there was a happy atmosphere in the school. The professor, a Navy officer, ordered the students to stop making noise. When they did
not comply, he expelled the students from the school. The students' parents complained to military authorities and requested that their children be readmitted. The authorities warned them to stop complaining or “they would regret it.” Some days later, heavily armed masked groups invaded the houses of the students and kidnapped them. After their incarceration at the Little School, the students were freed.

_Others arrested/disappeared:_

—A 50 year old woman who had a shop in Ingeniero White. She stayed for two days.

—A 26 year old man, a gardener. Guards tortured him, burning him with a blow torch. They kept him outside of the building in a trailer. He was thin, approximately 6 ft., with brown eyes and straight chestnut brown hair. He wore glasses. He was detained at the end of January, 1977.

—A young man with a deep chest wound, the result of torture. I heard him begging to have his wound dressed for several days, but, according to the guards, by the time they finally dressed the wound it had become severely infected.

—A couple who were kept outside in a trailer.

—A soldier.

—Another couple, captured on April 24, 1977.

_A case subsequent to my detention in the Little School, Ana María Germani de Maisonave and Rodolfo Maisonave:_

Ana María and Rodolfo arrived at the Villa Floresta prison, Bahía Blanca in August 1977 after being “disappeared” in the Little School for about fifteen days. Ana María was a biochemist and was 32 years old when she was captured. They had one daughter, only months old at the time of her capture with
her parents. She spent one day in the concentration camp and was then left on the door step of her grandparents’ house. Rodolfo and Ana María were tortured. Both were condemned to 25 years in prison by a military court in a totally arbitrary and illegal manner. They were released in 1983, as a result of domestic and international pressure on the military government.

Prior to January 1977

The case of Graciela Izurieta and her friend:
Graciela Izurieta, 26 years old, sister of Zulma “Vasca” Izurieta, was captured in her home in the middle of October 1976. Graciela was three months pregnant when she “disappeared.” The operation in which she was detained was carried out by uniformed soldiers. Graciela was taken from the Little School at the end of December, 1976, approximately in her fifth month of pregnancy. Her friend was working in construction. His photograph appeared in La Nueva Provincia, as “dead in a confrontation with the army” in front of a school. In this sham battle, José Luis Peralta also was listed as dead. According to the testimonies of prisoners, he had been detained in March in Mar del Plata and transferred to the Little School with a wound in his foot.

The case of María Eugenia González de Junquera and Néstor Junquera:
María, 22 years old, and Néstor, 25 years old, were kidnapped in their home in Bahía Blanca on November 13, 1976. The capture was carried out by heavily armed individuals, dressed in plain clothes. María and Néstor were the parents
of two children, Mauricio, a two year old boy, and Anahí, a few-month old girl. The babies were given to the family. Néstor worked for Dow Chemical in the construction of the petrochemical complex in Bahía Blanca. Both were tortured in The Little School and María Eugenia, who was recovering from an abortion, was in danger of dying from torture. Testimonies of people who were at the Little School before me affirmed that María Eugenia and Néstor were taken away in the middle of December 1976. Nothing more is known of them, although a writ of habeas corpus was filed.

The case of Juan Carlos Castilla and Juan Pablo Fornazari:

Juan Carlos and Juan Pablo were captured in September or October of 1976 while they were traveling in a pick-up truck on their way to Bahía Blanca. They were stopped by the police just outside the city and were taken to the Headquarters of the 5th Army Corps. According to testimonies, they endured many hours with blindfolds over their eyes, standing naked outside in bad weather and surrounded by trained watch dogs that would not allow them to move. Later they were transferred to the Little School. There they were savagely tortured: after being extremely weakened by torture with electric shock, Juan Carlos Castilla had to remain standing on his feet, while his testicles were tied to the window grating of the building. In December 1976, La Nueva Provincia reported that they died in a confrontation with the military. Their pick-up truck was taken by the military and used at the Little School, among other things, to go look for food, which was brought from the Headquarters of the 5th Army Corps.
The case of Manuel Tarchitzky and Zulma Matzkin:
It was reported in the newspaper that Manuel and Zulma
died in a confrontation while they were traveling in a Fiat
600 on a route near Bahía Blanca. Actually Zulma and Manuel
were kidnapped by military forces on different dates and in
different places long before the date they were assassinated.
They were brought to the Little School before the date of
the phony confrontation, which was in October or November
1976.

The case of Horacio Russin:
Horacio was captured at the end of November 1976. He
was 26 years old and a counselor at the Center for Adolescents
in Bahía Blanca. He was captured in his home. Horacio was
brutally tortured and—according to testimony—had to be
transferred to a penal hospital in Sierra Chica, where he died
in 1977.

The Case of “Patichoti”:
Patichoti was arrested in Mar del Plata while riding on
a bus. He was taken to a police station and brutally tortured.
Afterward, he was taken to the Little School where he spent
about four months before being transferred to a regular prison.
The name “Patichoti” (“bad leg”) refers to his disability;
because of an amputation, which occurred prior to his arrest,
he wore a wooden prosthesis. He was eventually released and
lives in Argentina.

Others who passed through the Little School:
These are people who passed through the Little School
and have since been freed. I will not reveal their names because
I do not want to endanger them:
  -- A young male student, 21 years old.
  -- A couple, parents of two children.
  -- Another couple; the woman was 28 years old, and the man 31 years old.
  -- Two brothers about 26 and 28 years old.
Appendix:
Descriptions of the Guards at the Little School

The guard at the Little School was composed largely of personnel from the Gendarme Nacional, the Army division responsible for border patrols. There were two shifts of twelve guards; each shift took custody of the disappeared people for intervals of two months. There were two permanent shift supervisors who controlled the camp every other day. These supervisors (apparently officers) were in charge of torture at the interrogations and also took part in the kidnappings and transfers. Some guards participated in the torture and kidnapping operations—which they boasted about—and received extra money and shared in the benefits of the “booty.” All the guards were in charge of daily physical and psychological torture consisting of the on-going mistreatment and humiliation of the prisoners. There were two interrogators, intelligence personnel who visited without notice and apparently supervised the “work” of the shift supervisors. Every now and then special groups arrived, preceded by nervousness among the guards, who washed the floors, etc.

The guards’ shifts were organized in three groups of four guards each. Each group had one working day, one day of rest (during which they were authorized to leave the premises), and one day “on call,” when they were used as
reinforcements as necessary. The reinforcements were in charge of picking up the food from the headquarters. Daily, the groups rotated these positions: one soldier inside the rooms, one in the hallway, one in the guard house outside, and one “rover.” After months of attentive listening, I was able to figure out their numbers and how they were organized. They called each other by nicknames. Thanks to the loose blindfold, I can give approximate physical descriptions.

The guard in charge of our transfer to prison was Nuñes (alias “Monkey”), who was also in charge of the “special detainees” (political prisoners) at the prison of Villa Floresta, Bahía Blanca. The interrogators were Tío and Pelado.

**Shift supervisors:**

*Chiche:* approximately 22 or 23 years old, 6 ft., 154 lbs., straight hair, brown eyes, white complexion, regular features. In an audacious fit, he ordered me to look at him without my blindfold, so he could prove that he was not afraid of “subversives.” He had a smile of self-sufficiency; his voice was slightly nasal.

*Turco:* 26-28 years old, 6 ft., 154 lbs., more corpulent than Chiche, curly hair, dark eyes, thick and connecting eyebrows.

**First two-month shift:**

*Viejo (“Old Man”):* Small stature, very thin, about 40 years old; boasted about working at a concentration camp in Tucumán and of working two consecutive shifts of two months each.
**Vaca** ("Cow"): Fat, medium height, about 35 years old.

**Gordo-Polo**: Fat, approximately 5 ft. 8 in., about 28 years old; he said he was from Neuquén.

**Others**: **Flaco** ("Skinny"), **Gato-Vaca** ("Cat-cow"), **Indio** ("Indian"), **Perro** ("Dog"), and five others whose aliases I cannot remember.

**Second two-month shift:**

**Abuelo** ("Grandfather"): Approximately 5 ft. 8 in., corpulent but not fat, dark eyes and a dark receding hairline. About 35 years old, from the Santa Fé province. He bragged about being a mercenary and participating in the maneuvers.

**Zorzal** ("Thrush"): Thirty-three years old, approximately 5 ft. 9 in., dark straight hair, brown eyes and a mustache. His mother was living in Niniguau, a small town near San Martín de los Andes. He was a Gendarme officer.

**Chamamé**: Approximately 6 ft., thin, 30 years old, from Corrientes, dark hair and eyes. He was at the Little School for a month, then left. Some said that he had been arrested for allegedly swindling the army.

**Pato** ("Duck"): Approximately 5 ft. 11 in., about forty years old, corpulent but not fat, dark hair and eyes, very dark mustache; spoke with a lisp. He said he was an electrician as well as a soldier, and talked frequently of his wife and children. He was almost always drunk. He was a Gendarme officer.

**Loro** ("Parrot"): Approximately 6 ft., about 18 years old, thin.

**Bruja** ("Witch"): Named Roberto, from Mendoza, approximately 5 ft. 11 in., twenty-ish, thin.

**Peine** ("Comb"): Approximately 5 ft. 9 in., about 45 years
old, dark hair and eyes, large dark mustache.

Others: Tino, Dog, and three other guards whose aliases I don’t remember.
About the Author

Alicia Partnoy was born in Argentina in 1955. During her years as a political prisoner her stories and poems were smuggled out of prison and published anonymously in human rights journals. Since her arrival in the United States, she has lectured extensively at the invitation of Amnesty International, religious organizations, and universities. Alicia has presented testimony on human rights violations in Argentina to the United Nations, the Organization of American States, Amnesty International, and human rights organizations in Argentina. Her testimony was quoted in the final report of the Argentine Commission for the Investigation of Disappearance. She has translated her poems and performed them at solidarity rallies and other events, including the 1984 Sisterfire Festival in Washington D.C. Her performance is included on the Sisterfire Album (Redwood Records, 1985). Singer Ronnie Gilbert performs her poetry; recently her work was set to music by Sweet Honey in the Rock. Alicia works nine to five as a bilingual receptionist and is studying translation. She lives in Washington D.C. with her companion, Antonio, and her daughter, Ruth.