

# The Screams Behind the Photographs

By Ambassador Héctor Timerman



Photo by Adriana Lestido.

When I viewed the exhibit “*En Negro y Blanco: Images of State Terrorism in Argentina (1976–1983)*,” when I actually saw the photographs hanging on the walls, I was amazed at how the state-sponsored terror that engulfed my country for more than seven years, the violence that preceded it and the hopes that came afterward could be described in just 40 photos. It would take several books to express in words what is chronicled in these images. Along with the aesthetic and professional value of the display, it is this ability to communicate history that does credit to the photographers who researched and selected the material.

Although every picture brings back memories of people I knew or scenes where I was present, there is one photograph that saddens me the

most: the burial of my childhood friend, Eduardo Beckerman, who was killed by the secret police when he was 19 years old. He was the first of my friends to die.

One of the distinctive features of state terrorism is how easily and efficiently it spreads terror throughout a nation. By using the armed forces to pressure specific so-called dangerous groups (whether they are called communists, terrorists, bourgeoisie or Jews does not matter), terror is used to discipline an entire social body. The nightmare of Argentina is as vividly noticeable in the actions perpetrated by the death squads as in the images of ordinary people going on with their daily lives in the middle of that ordeal.

The most accurate complement to these images has left no visual record; it lies in the testimony of survivors, the conscience of the

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A mother and her child protest at the 1982 March for Life.



The banality of evil:  
Argentine junta leaders at the World Cup, 1978.



Photo by David Garcia.

## The reality of evil:

A young man dragged off by the police, 1982.

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perpetrators and the memory of relatives. Torture is the weapon of state terrorism whose effects go far beyond the tortured body out into the entire society and whose lasting memories are as hard to forget as these pictures.

I, personally, remember what my family went through during those years. In 1971, my father, Jacobo Timerman, founded the newspaper *La Opinión*. By the mid-1970s it had become the most respected liberal paper in Argentina. When the most brutal dictatorship in Argentina's history came to power in 1976, my father's battles with the regime became a part of our family life, and I was proud, though scared, of his willingness to publish the names of the victims of the junta's repression.

In the early morning of April 15, 1977, the army broke into our home and kidnapped my father. That night was the beginning of a new, surreal existence for my family.

We went 40 days without knowing whether my father was alive or dead. Finally, the telephone rang. My father was on the line. He told us he was now officially recognized as a government prisoner and that we could visit him. If thinking about someone being tortured is painful, it is not as terrible as seeing the results of that torture. My mother and I waited for two hours in the Central Police Department. We were allowed only three minutes with my father. He was a man destroyed, both physically and mentally. Saying goodbye as if for the last time, he told us he would never be set free and to reorganize our lives on that basis. My mother sobbed uncontrollably as she saw what had become of him. She stroked him as if he were a child and kept asking, "What did they do to you? What did they do? Why are you so ill?"

For the next two months we were allowed to see him for a few minutes every day and, slowly, he told us about the long sessions of torture when the interrogators pressed him for information on his Zionist background and his relationships with other prominent Jewish figures. Among the torturers were people who were very knowledgeable about Israel and Judaism.

For the relatives of the tortured, it was very hard to go on living a normal life. Our reality was a kind of hell. When the media reported on the struggle against terrorism or the international campaign against Argentina, when people took to the streets to celebrate sports triumphs or entered a restaurant, laughing and kissing, it was impossible not to feel confusion, anger and emotional isolation. Watching normal people doing normal things we felt a bottomless sense of solitude and loneliness.

A few weeks after that first visit, a police officer approached us as we were waiting in line to enter the prison. He told us that my father had been transferred to an unknown location. He had vanished from police headquarters, again becoming a *desaparecido*.

For 30 days we lived in terror, our anxiety sharpened by the knowledge of the mistreatment he had suffered during the first kidnapping. Then a call came from the police. I would be allowed to visit my father for three minutes every Friday. Each week it was a different police station, generally far from the center of Buenos Aires. I was allowed to speak; my father was not.

One of those Fridays, my little brother Javier broke down in tears and demanded to see our father. I was not authorized to bring him along. Finally, I decided to take a chance. When we saw my father, pale and skeletal and handcuffed as always, Javier took out his report card and said, "Look Papa, I got the best grades in my class." My father wept. With the little flexibility allowed by the handcuffs, he signed Javier's report card. In the midst of all the horror, doing something so banal seemed like a huge victory.

In April 1978, due to health problems and world pressure, my father was released from a military prison and placed under house arrest. The apartment became the realm of the two dozen police officers who guarded my father 24 hours a day.

That September, just before the Jewish New Year, the American ambassador called me for one of our regular meetings. This time, I was the subject of his concern. He asked me, for my own safety, to leave the country. The armed forces



Photo courtesy of Archivo Cónica.

were furious about my contacts with human rights organizations and especially with the American Jewish community. Since I didn't have a valid passport, I went illegally to São Paulo where I contacted the Jewish Agency. Once through the Brazilian checkpoint I felt beyond the reach of the regime's henchmen for the first time in more than three years.

It would be another 15 months before we were all reunited in Tel Aviv. Bowing to intense international pressure, the Argentine junta finally expelled my father in September 1979.

In 1981, my father wrote *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*. Its publication in the United States unveiled for millions abroad what was happening in Argentina, and it became a powerful tool for the international community to build pressure against the dictatorship. There, he wrote:

Of all the dramatic situations I have witnessed in clandestine prisons, nothing can compare to those family groups who were tortured often together, sometimes separately but in view of one another, or in

different cells while one was aware of the other being tortured. The entire world of affection, built up over the years with utmost difficulty, collapses with a kick in the father's genitals, a smack on the mother's face, an obscene insult to the sister, or the sexual violation of a daughter. Suddenly an entire culture based on familial love, devotion, and the capacity for mutual sacrifice collapses. Nothing is possible in such a universe, and that is precisely what the torturers know.

Today, his book stands as a reminder of what a country gives up when it consents to torture, what is condoned by a society whose people agree to compromise their freedoms in the name of a superior national interest. His work represents the memories of those years and the intangible terror that the images exhibited at CLAS so clearly reveal.

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The funeral of Eduardo Beckerman, 1974.