AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

In June of 1991, I traveled to Argentina as a volunteer for the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, or Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team. I spent two months working with this team of archaeologists and doctors in a site already under excavation in the cemetery of Avellaneda, a city on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. There, among the imposing tombs and mausoleums of some of Argentina's less well known statesmen and military heroes, we divided off an abandoned section of land into grids and slowly began to shave down the earth centimeter by centimeter with sharpened trowels. As the bones began to appear, we dusted them off with small brushes, recording their positions in the ground.

Avellaneda was the site of a mass grave of "disappeared" people, or *desaparecidos*, murder victims of Argentina's most recent military dictatorship, the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process of National Reorganization, 1976–1982). By the time the excavation was completed, the team had uncovered the skeletons of close to four hundred people—men, women, and children—many with obvious signs

of having been executed by nine-millimeter pistol and machine gun rounds.

Avellaneda is but one example of the mass graves spread throughout Argentina, a depository for the Armed Forces' campaign of kidnapping and mass murder, or "Dirty War," allegedly for the purpose of eradicating urban terrorism. The National Commission on the Disappearance of People (CONADEP), created by the democratic government of President Raúl Alfonsin in 1983 to investigate human rights violations, initially set the number of disappeared at 8,960. Later, official estimates ranged to ten thousand, while national and international human rights organizations independent of the government have set the figure as high as thirty thousand.

One day in July, as I sat in the graveyard, washing the soil off one set of bones I had recently uncovered and letting them dry in the sun, I began to wonder who this person had been whose bones I was handling. From the pelvis and the configuration of the skull, we could often determine whether the victim was male or female. Height could be established fairly well, and so could age.

But who was this person? What had he or she been like? Who were all of them, body piled on top of body, sometimes thirteen deep in a grave?

CONADEP's final report, entitled *Nunca Más (Never Again)*, describes cases of extrajudicial arrest, detention in at least 340 clandestine prison camps throughout the country, torture—including electrocution with cattle prods, rape, drowning, beatings—and mass murder. Although the Argentine soil has been described in some cases as being virtually saturated with corpses as a result of this process, identification of victims' remains has been possible only in a limited number of cases. Very few X-rays of the kidnap victims, prior to their deaths, have survived the passing of time. Without such documentation, to compare a victim's known bone structure (including distinguishing fractures caused by childhood accidents, dental work, and natural defects) against the remains uncovered by the archaeological team, there is little chance of identification.

When a murder victim is identified (the rare exception rather than

the norm), the surviving family members are contacted, and those that wish may gather for a memorial service, often in the same cemetery where the remains were discovered. Some words are said about this person's life, friends and relatives cry, and the cemetery custodian places the small box of bones in the family niche and then locks the door. The families, still crying, the older members leaning on the younger ones, the younger ones not quite sure what it is they've seen, leave the labyrinth of tombs and return home. Here the story ends. The skeleton now has a nameplate; perhaps a photograph is placed beside it. Several such photos can be seen in Avellaneda through the dusty glass of the small crypts: yellowed paper pinned to silver frames.

That day in July, I tried to imagine the bones that I was cataloging with a black felt-tip pen—the grid number where they had been found and the date—as having been part of a person that walked and lived and breathed, and I found it very difficult.

So many times the disappeared seem removed from our reality. We suppose that they were once alive because we can see what is left of them—bones, bits of clothing, photographs—but because we lack a person, a personality, to connect our lives with theirs, we find it extremely hard to imagine that each one, in fact, had been a real person. In this way, ten thousand dead, twenty thousand, thirty thousand come to be mere numbers, arbitrary and lacking in humanity.

Indeed, even in the face of overwhelming evidence collected by the anthropologists, and even after recent admissions from "repentant" soldiers that hundreds of victims of the military regime had been drugged and tossed into the sea to die, there are still many Argentines who maintain that there are no disappeared people, a common piece of conversation overheard in the open air cafés of Buenos Aires and in the long lines outside its cinemas. There are also those who concede that there were "excesses" committed by the Armed Forces, and who justify them as tragic but unavoidable consequences of a war against subversion. In all of this discourse of guilt-shifting and recrimination—which group was more right or more wrong, the military or the revolutionaries—the people who were murdered in this process

are nowhere to be found. They are still disappeared in many ways, even after their exhumations have been performed.

As I put the bones in a cardboard box and stood to place them in the nearby morgue for storage, I saw the apartment complexes rising over the low-lying walls of the cemetery, which had been standing long before the military dictatorship. I imagined the people living in those apartments, who saw the military trucks pass by year after year in the night and unload stacks of bodies under the electric lights. They all knew what was going on. They all knew, and yet they never said a word. I thought to myself, What could be said of the disappeared if they wouldn't speak?

I began to think of all the other unknown lives stacked away neatly in the cardboard boxes on the shelves of the morgue. I thought of all the families left behind when their sons or daughters, wives and husbands, were made to disappear. There had to have been people before the disappearances, before there were bones and graves and grieving mothers. There had to be people who would talk. . . .

What appears in the following pages is the result of more than two years of investigation and research into the life of one disappeared person. Out of the many lives worthy of investigation in the cemetery of Avellaneda (indeed, in all of Argentina) I have selected a young woman whom I call Julia Andrea Montesini. The reasons for my selecting Julia are above all practical. In the first place, there was a great deal of forensic evidence available that positively identified her as a murder victim of the Argentine military. Second, she was survived by people able to perform a second exhumation—emotional, psychological—those willing and brave enough to talk about what type of person Julia had been.

Whereas there is a great deal of literature available on the political and economic effects produced by the dictatorship upon Argentine society, thorough analysis of books written about the Dirty War, there has been little attention paid to the voices of the people who lived through those dark times. My intention is to take a new approach, to begin to listen. Therefore, in my presentation I have taken great pains to exclude quotations from secondary sources, focusing instead upon

the voices of those persons directly involved. I write down the words of these survivors of the Dirty War from conversations that I tape-recorded, face to face with them, in kitchens, cafés, offices, and living rooms throughout Argentina, from the summer of 1991 to the spring of 1993. What follows here is neither a political treatise nor an anthropological study. Rather, it comprises brief sketches, outlines of the personalities of those who knew Julia, vignettes of who she was, memories of what she meant to them. This style of writing may prove bothersome to those readers accustomed to an extensive bibliography, but, after all, the story of Julia is not something provable, palpable. It is an opinion, and she is an idea that lives in people's minds. I leave it to other authors to paint their pictures from the "scholarly" sources.

It is impossible, however, to present these personal histories without touching upon the larger historical and political events that formed the background of Julia's disappearance. I have also included interviews with Argentine experts in the field of human rights. Here, in their own voices, the soldiers, politicians, activists, and priests tell their own stories of the disappeared.

I am forced to say in this introduction that there are many people who do not want this story to be told, not only the soldiers and policemen responsible for Julia's death but also many of those who knew her as friends. They ask me, "Why bring this up, after all these years, if the only consequence will be to bring back memories of fear and pain?"

In responding to this question, I am reminded of my former college literature teacher, Arnošt Lustig, a writer on the Holocaust. He recounted that one day, as he was in the synagogue relating some of his experiences as a prisoner in the concentration camps, he was shouted down by some of the people present, who said, "You shouldn't bring this up, Arnošt. It is better to forget all of this ugliness."

Arnošt responded with a story. One winter day in 1944, as he was walking about an anonymous prison compound in Auschwitz-Birkenau, he felt terribly cold, drained of energy. As he began to walk more and more slowly, he realized that he was freezing to death, and that he would soon collapse. Suddenly, a group of men who had been

wandering on the fringe of the compound gathered around him and pressed their bodies together, raising his temperature through their body heat. They stayed only for a short time, and then they dispersed, and Arnošt never saw them again.

Arnošt said that this is why he talks about the Holocaust, this is why he reminds people what it was like. Although it was ugly, although it was terrible, there was one beautiful moment when people gathered together to save his life, and this act of human solidarity had to be remembered.

That is how I view this presentation of voices, as strangers huddling in the cold, trying to preserve not a life, but the memory of one, a memory of Julia. And it is cold today in Argentina, when it is considered socially and politically best not to touch upon the subject of the disappeared, best to forget and to go on.

But these people do not gather for Julia's sake alone. They also gather for themselves. Julia is the silver cord running through their very different lives. Doctors, secretaries, prisoners—strangers among themselves—they are bound together by her, because the day that Julia disappeared, she did not disappear alone.

Each person who knew Julia disappeared a bit that day—psychologically, emotionally—many denying for years that they ever knew Julia for fear of being made to disappear as well, others changing jobs, quitting schools, because they couldn't stand the memories that such places held for them. Some ran away, and some are still running. Here, the storytellers give pieces of their own lives as they talk, filtering the memories of Julia through their own experiences. Sometimes it is a song. Sometimes it is a poem. Sometimes it appears to be a mad rambling of the miserable and the despised. But it is always Julia, and it is a part of them as well.

To say, "I remember Julia" for them is not only an act of memory but also an act of faith, an act of love. What follows is quite a simple story. There was once a young woman named Julia. She had a family and friends who loved her very much. Then, one day, she was kidnapped by a section of the Argentine Armed Forces, she was held for

several months in a series of concentration camps, and then she was murdered.

This is an elegy for the dead, and a chance for the living to reclaim a memory of someone who touched their lives in a very special way, someone whom they cannot forget, someone who is not just another number in an unmarked grave.

1

The Cemetery

It was noon on an early May day, 1991, the sun's rays barely reaching over the long shadow of row upon row of family crypts. The priest stood in the whitewashed chapel. His arms outspread, he spoke a few words to the people gathered there about justice, love, and remembrance. Fourteen years after her death, the ritual of burial for Julia Andrea Montesini had begun.

A man named Manuel began to argue with the priest. He shouted and cried, becoming almost hysterical. What had disturbed him most was the band of policemen keeping watch on the fringe of the ceremony. To him, it was as if the Argentine security services that had murdered Julia were enjoying the last act of the show, gloating in their victory. When asked why they were there, they replied, "to provide order." After all, this was one of the first identifications and reburials of a disappeared person in Avellaneda since the return of the civilian

government in 1983. They had expected at least two hundred people to attend, the policemen said. Little more then twenty did.

The crowd was relatively small, but like a scene from a Greek tragedy, everyone donned a mask to represent the larger force that brought them to the cemetery that day. They were all present—the innocent, the dead, the guilty, and the lost.

Representatives from the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were there, wearing their distinctive white kerchiefs, embroidered with the names of their children, like Julia, who had been made to disappear forever by the military government. There were doctors from the hospital where Julia had worked, family members, and friends. The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo were also present, women whose daughters or daughters-in-law like Julia had been kidnapped while pregnant, and the fate of their missing grandchildren remained unknown.

A few hundred meters from where the burial ceremony was taking place, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team had discovered Julia's remains the year before. She had been buried in a clandestine grave site within the cemetery walls, along with 334 other corpses registered merely as NN, or *nihel nomen* in Latin, the nameless ones.

Patricia "Pato" Bernardi, the president of the Team, remembers working at the graveyard the day Julia's remains were unearthed. Of all the sectors into which the Team had divided the excavation site, Patricia remembers that the going was most difficult in sector 135. Covered by years of garbage tossed over the cemetery wall by neighbors, it was, in an archeological sense, a complete nightmare. Adding to the problems was the wet weather that wreaked havoc with the earth, mixing the various levels of bricks and metal springs—even a bed post, Patricia recalls—with the human remains. But then, as Patricia describes, at a lower level during the month of February 1990, the archaeologists

> began to see the disposition of skeletons in a more coherent form, more articulated. . . . Three skeletons appeared, which we determined were female. We were working . . . and someone says to

> me, "Oy, there's something strange inside this one." Well, Alejandro [the Team's medical doctor] was there, and we asked him "Hey, what could have happened so that a person could have this in his sternum?"

What Patricia referred to was a series of surgical wires running through the sternum of a skeleton that would be known from that day on as #17. Alejandro said that he thought it could be the result of a heart operation. Patricia doesn't know why, but as soon as she heard Alejandro's explanation, she felt sure she knew whose remains they had just discovered.

Out of the reams and reams of notes collected by the anthropologists from family members of the disappeared—notebooks filled with physical information, bone defects, medical histories—Patricia says:

> We had divided the information according to the clandestine detention centers. I was in charge of the Pozo de Banfield. There were things that I knew by memory, for example that one of the women who had been seen in the Pozo de Banfield had undergone a heart operation one year before her kidnapping. This point remained recorded inside of me. Because of this, when Alejandro confirmed that they were suture wires, I immediately remembered Julia Andrea Montesini.

When the anthropologists removed the skeleton and took it to the morgue to be washed, they found that the skull had been completely shattered by a gunshot blast, and it was impossible to reconstruct in its entirety. Moreover, there was no way to determine the exact day, month, or even year of the murder. As Patricia relates, the forensic team concluded in its final report:

> Concerning the cause of death of skeleton #17 we can say that the same was produced by the passage of a projectile from a firearm through the cranium, which caused severe damage to the brain. Additionally, fragments of a firearm projectile were recovered during the archeological excavation.

From calculations made from the victim's coccyx, the anthropologists determined that she had been thirty years old at the time of death, plus or minus two years, and they estimated her height at about 157 centimeters plus or minus 3.55 centimeters. Following Patricia's hunch, this fit almost exactly the age and height of Dr. Julia Andrea Montesini, missing since March 1977. Additionally, what is termed a preauricular notch was found on the remains of the pelvis, a mark often caused by the extreme pressure produced during childbirth. (If this, indeed, were Julia, the appearance of the notch would follow, as she had been two months pregnant at the time of her kidnapping.) Finally, the anthropologists took note of the extensive dental reconstruction in the skull of skeleton #17, and Patricia remembers thinking, "What bad teeth for such a young girl."

The surviving brother, Manuel, was asked to come to Avellaneda, and the anthropologists began the difficult task of asking him questions about Julia's physical composition, what she had looked like, trying to match the description of this young woman to the bones they had found. The age, the height, the wires in the sternum, even the preauricular notch seemed to point to a positive identification, and yet it was impossible to state without doubt that skeleton #17 was that of Julia. Literally thousands of women Julia's age and height had been kidnapped by the military; of those, it was impossible to say how many could have been pregnant, or how many possibly could have had heart operations. It was a terrible time of doubt, Patricia remembers. Manuel was so close to finding his only sister after all these years, but he had no way of knowing for sure.

Tired and depressed, Manuel and the anthropologists retired to a small café near the graveyard to talk. As they sat in this nether zone of hope and desperation, the coffee finished, a bottle of wine opened, they drank in silence. Patricia shuffled through the fragments of information that Manuel could provide. It was all the same old information. Graveyard workers moved in and out, kicking the mud from their boots, leaving their shovels at the door. Nothing that the anthropologists could think of seemed to help. There were no other leads.

And then Manuel looked up and said softly that if it would help at all, he remembered that Julia had suffered from dental problems.

Julia's former orthodontist was immediately contacted by Alejandro and told of the possible identification. Remarkably, this doctor had maintained three sets of files all these years: one for her current patients, one for those who had died or permanently moved away, and a third for those who had disappeared without a trace. It was in this final category that Julia's charts were located, and it was discovered that both upper and lower sets of teeth had been extensively reconstructed. Armed with her files, the orthodontist traveled to Avellaneda and positively identified the prostheses found in the skull of skeleton #17 as her handiwork, including the materials she had used in the operation. It was that day, from a common grave, thirteen years after her disappearance, that Julia once again appeared.