

Vanished In Argentina

By John B. Cakes

BUENOS AIRES — As he left his apartment on a recent morning, the young man told his wife that he was going down the street on a brief errand and would soon return. When he failed to reappear after several hours, his wife went to the local police station to see if there had been an accident. Neither she nor her husband has been seen or heard from since. This is life in Argentina today.

This young couple may yet turn up — after the usual questioning under torture — among the nearly 3,000 political prisoners suspected by the secret police of "ideological subversion" and known to be held without charges, without trial, without hope of release except at discretion of the President.

But, more likely, they will have already joined the lengthening lists of the "disappeared." These are the victims — now mostly presumed dead — of that secret and savage war of terror against terrorism that has already cost the lives of 5,000 to 15,000 people and has poisoned Argentine political life for at least the past three years.

Having beaten the urban and rural guerrillas at their own game and virtually destroyed them by their own

methods, the army's clandestine forces gradually widened their counter-terrorist net in ever-increasing circles.

"They're after the potential subversives now, the so-called 'ideologues,'" says a prominent Catholic civil-rights lawyer who was once a high official of a government. "These are the labor leaders, lawyers, doctors, social workers, intellectuals, students suspected of any leaning — or potential leaning — toward the left. And if they happen to be Jewish, so much the worse for them." There have only been about 20 "disappearances" this year — a significant drop from last year's 50 to 200 per month. "But they do continue," the lawyer added. His own 21-year-old daughter, a social worker, was picked up by the police one night three years ago while she was assisting a group of nuns working in one of Buenos Aires' poorest areas. Taken away for "an hour's questioning," she — like thousands of others — has not been seen again.

"All we found next day was hair and blood on the floor," tersely said the wife of a prosperous businessman whose sister had been wrenched from her home one night. She, too, was never seen again.

The pattern is always the same. To every inquiry, every attempt at habeas corpus, every plea for information — except in the rarest cases — the answer invariably comes back: "Sorry, we never heard of him. That case doesn't exist." The Papal Nuncio, a human-rights activist (which Buenos Aires's Cardinal is not), has passed along to the authorities appeals from 4,000 families of "the vanished ones." He has received substantive replies in two of these 4,000 cases.

It's an Orwellian world. "This is the first time I've ever been in jail," said one prisoner to his captors. "No," was the reply. "You're not in jail; you're simply out of society." And being "out of society" means systematic torture to extract information (the Argentinians, always admirers of the French, model their techniques on those used in Algeria) — even if it doesn't end (as it so often does) in death, dismemberment and disappearance.

"After his arrest without charge when he reported for military service, he was blindfolded, kicked, urinated on as he lay on the floor of his cell, tortured with electric shock to make him reveal his suspected 'subversive' associates, beaten with chains," says the wife of a distinguished professor, speaking of her 16-year-old son.

"That was three and a half years ago. His cell is 6½ feet; he is up at 5, in bed at 9, and not allowed to lie down in between. He's in the courtyard two hours a day — but no sports, no recreation. He's allowed three novels per month. It's physical and mental paralysis. His case is still on appeal; but no lawyer can take it because there are no charges against him."

"Mothers seek son, daughter and grandson" reads a four-column headline in The Buenos Aires Herald, the only daily that has the courage to print this kind of story as news. The story itself is not unusual. A young engineering student and his pregnant wife had been kidnapped a year ago and have not been seen since, nor has the whereabouts of their baby, if it lives, ever been revealed. But this is unusual: what the mothers of the missing couple said in a paid advertisement in one of the capital's major newspapers.

"We believe that the fate of our children has something to do with the des-

tiny of the entire nation. We believe that a society that hides and tolerates barbarity is preparing its own destruction, because it becomes an accomplice to it. The most capable and most renowned people become used to keeping quiet. And while they do so, the most unscrupulous, arrogant, blood-thirsty and cowardly become... the masters. We want to see a free and proud country, with men who raise their voices so that justice and peace may reign forever."

John B. Cakes is the former Senior Editor of The New York Times. This is the second of two articles.