

Peace Week Speaker Renee Epelbaum

Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo

by Lois Wadsworth

Between 1976 and 1983 the military junta that ruled Argentina "disappeared" as many as 20,000 young people, most of them during the first two years following the coup. Over 30,000 people from all walks of life are reported to have been disappeared. To be disappeared is to be forcibly abducted by the police or the military, held in secrecy, surely tortured and probably murdered. There are no paper trails, no documents, no records. It was a time of nightmarish anguish for the victims and their families.

Renee Epelbaum is an Argentine Jew, a widow who lost all three of her grown children to the "security" forces of the regime. Her oldest son, a doctor who worked with the poor in Buenos Aires, was disappeared shortly after the military coup brought the generals to power. She fled to Uruguay with her younger son and daughter, but they found no safety there. The Uruguayan military performed the dirty work for the Argentine security forces, and they, too, were disappeared. With restrained bitterness, Epelbaum refers to her children's killers as "cowards, hypocrites who did everything in a clandestine way . . . who didn't even have the courage to sign the death warrants. This can happen anywhere, anywhere," she warns.

In 1977 Renee Epelbaum joined with a handful of other mothers of the disappeared who were desperate and without options. "We still had hopes at that time that we would recover our children," she says. "I love young people, you know. They are filled with ideas. It was very pleasant with my children—I knew them very well—and there were other people like them. . . . We had to fight."

Before the mothers got together, each woman, alone, had to bear not only the pain of separation from her children but the terrible frustration of being unable to get any information about them. Epelbaum told a counselor at the time that she would gladly go to the Plaza de Mayo, the main square in Buenos Aires, and like the priests in Cambodia, set fire to herself if that would help return her children. She didn't know, of course, that the Plaza would become the site of the most influential protest against the regime, and that she would have a leading role in the movement. "No one knows how much one can endure. One doesn't choose destiny, fate," she says of her involvement with the mother's movement, "rather, it's the reverse."

The mothers—Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, as they have come to be known—wearing white scarves and carrying photographs of their missing children and grandchildren—met each Thursday to walk around the square in the center of the busy business and government district of

the capital city, in open protest of the dictatorship. Their ranks swelled to include thousands of other citizens. They demanded information and accountability from a government so arrogant that its official euphemism for the indiscriminate torture and killing of dissidents was "the dirty war against terrorism." Las Madres became a symbol for the Argentine people's struggle against a powerful, entrenched military government.

In 1983, following the Malvinas debacle (the Falklands Crisis, as the American media referred to it), the generals were forced out of power and the civilian government of Raoul Alfonsín was elected to office. His government promised to prosecute the former military leaders for their crimes. Over the next few years, some of those responsible were brought to justice in celebrated trials, but many more were left unpunished. Bowing to pressure from the still-influential military, President Alfonsín sent a bill to the Parliament in December of 1985 which put a 60-day limit for legal charges to be brought against the human rights violators of the former military regime. It was overwhelmingly passed by both houses. Violent demonstrations erupted on the streets. The Mothers are fighting to have this "immoral law," the *Punto Final*, declared unconstitutional.

"This is a very bitter situation," says Renee Epelbaum. "We are not against the government. On the contrary, we are sure that the worst democracy is better than the best dictatorship; but we don't agree with their policy concerning human rights. They have made very serious mistakes. . . . When the government was deciding to send the bill to Parliament, a poll showed that most of the population, 80-90 percent, disagreed . . . and wanted the guilty to be punished."

But a small number of people belonging to the armed forces and their friends who have power and money took out paid advertisements in the newspapers, says Epelbaum. She says the ads picture "the poor innocent military . . . as the saviors of our country, of our Western way of life. Imagine, torture as the Western way of life."

The mothers are still marching in the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday. Some of the women have died, but their places are being taken by the children who were infants and little children when their parents were killed. One of the major tasks of the organization has been to locate those missing children and reunite them with their natural families. "Las Madres has done an excellent job," Epelbaum says. "They have found many children, but not all of those found



"She didn't know that the Plaza would become the site of the most influential protest against the regime, and that she would have a leading role in the movement."

could be recovered. . . . Not all judges perform their duties well. Some people who have the children of the missing have fled the country, fled the city where they have been living, with the complicity of the judges."

The Alfonsín government's amnesty set February 22, 1987, as the deadline after which military and police officials would be immune to prosecution. "The *Punto Final* was not necessary," Epelbaum says. "Most of the abductions took place in 1976-77 . . . and almost all of them had run out of time. But the military people are so arrogant. . . . They don't want moral sanctions, they don't want to go to jail, they don't want to be prosecuted, summoned, to go to court. . . . They think they are above the law. . . . Our constitution says all people are equal before the law, but this . . . law says that after a special date, these people—the military—cannot be summoned any more."

Epelbaum says that Las Madres wants the "United Nations to declare forced disappearance a crime against humanity—like torture and genocide," crimes for which the statute of limitations does not apply. "Because, you see, disappearance is *always* followed by torture and generally by murder," she says. She hopes the American people will convince their leaders in Congress that the final point law which excuses

criminal violations of human rights is not acceptable.

You may hear this remarkable woman speak during Peace Week at the University of Oregon. She will deliver the keynote address Wednesday night, April 8, at 8:30 pm, in 150 Geology. Preceding her address, an exceptionally moving documentary film will be shown. *Las Madres*, co-produced by Susana Blaustein Munoz and Lourdes Portillo and directed by Munoz, grew out of an encounter the filmmakers had with Epelbaum in Washington, D.C. in May of 1983. The film will be shown Wednesday night at 7:30, 150 Geology, as well as the preceding Saturday afternoon, April 4, at 4:30 at Cinema 7. See the *What's Happening* calendar for a complete schedule of other Peace Week events.

[Thanks to Chris Orsinger of the Council for Human Rights in Latin America and Julie Spencer Robinson of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C., for making the telephone interview with Ms. Epelbaum possible; to Steve Bove of Cinema 7 for the benefit showing of *Las Madres*; and to Renee Epelbaum for her courage and generosity in sharing her experiences.]

!PRONTO! Spanish Classes

**Begin April 8th
10 Weeks. 7-9:30 p.m.**

- Wednesdays: Beginning and Intermediate
- Thursdays: Beginning II and Advanced
- \$35

Native Experienced Instructors

For more information, call:
344-1799 or 484-5867

Sponsored by
Council for Human Rights in Latin America
1236 Kincaid

Under New Ownership!

**LINCOLN
STREET
MARKET**

17th & Lincoln • Eugene, Oregon

Come to the Market where shopping is still a friendly experience and prices are reasonable.

Now featuring a delightful selection of Domestic (N'West and California) and Imported wines at very affordable prices.

Mon-Sat 7 am-11 pm Sunday 9 am-10 pm
"The Late Night Alternative Grocery Store"

Travel the World at Folkways

Clothing, jewelry and folk art from 40 countries.

Folkways Imports

Fifth St. Public Market
downstairs
683-2204

762 E. 13th
next to the Excelsior
343-8667