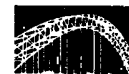


Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior

A FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT
OF ATROCITY

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Translated from
the Spanish by Esther Allen



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History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.

— James Joyce, *Ulysses*

Preface to the 2005 Edition

CONFESSIONS OF an Argentine Dirty Warrior is much more than an interview between a journalist and a participant in the systematic military repression that took place in Argentina between 1976 and 1983 during the so-called Dirty War. In this book, for the first time, an Argentine military official publicly acknowledged the fact that thousands of people were murdered during those years: first drugged, then dumped from airplanes into the sea. Before this book's initial publication in Argentina in 1995, only the victims of the repression had spoken out about the horrific methods of extermination employed by the Argentine military. So, in a very real sense, this book marked a turning point in Argentina's knowledge of its own recent history.

In addition to its shocking revelation of the most serious crimes in our national memory, the original publication of *Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior* (first published in English in 1996 as *The Flight*) had a major impact on the investigation of

the dictatorship's murderous practices, and the eventual prosecution of those crimes.

Shortly after the book came out in Argentina, Human Rights Watch and the Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL) presented *amicus curiae* briefs before the Federal Court of Appeals for the Circuit of Buenos Aires in support of cases brought by family members of the victims, demanding, on the evidence presented in this book, the continued investigation into the fate of those who disappeared between 1976 and 1983. This gave rise to what are now called the *juicios por la verdad*, or "truth trials," which investigate and document these crimes, albeit without the possibility of prosecution or punishment. The creation of the truth trials was of vital importance in breaching the wall of impunity erected by the 1986 "Full Stop" and 1987 "Due Obedience" laws and the presidential pardons of 1989 and 1990, issued by former Presidents Raúl Alfonsín and Carlos Menem.

It must be remembered that, after an initial period of intense interest in clarifying the events of the Dirty War, Argentine society, as a consequence of the impunity laws, grew detached from those events (or perhaps frustrated in its desire to learn more about them). The chilling descriptions in *Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior* reawakened Argentina's interest in learning the truth.

Today, *Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior* is a key piece of evidence in the cases being brought by Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón against the subject of the book's interviews, Adolfo Scilingo, as well as against more than a hundred other participants in the repressive practices of Argentina's last military dictatorship.

Here, without even attempting to justify his actions, Scilingo confesses to one of the most brutal methods the dictatorship used to eliminate human beings. These few pages condense an important part of Argentina's dramatic recent history, as seen from a very particular perspective.

In short, this book is indispensable to an understanding of one of the most complex and bloody periods in Argentine history.

—Judge Gabriel R. Cavallo

On March 4, 2001, Judge Cavallo nullified and declared unconstitutional the "Full Stop" and "Due Obedience" laws, in response to a petition by Horacio Verbitsky, acting as president of the Center for Legal and Social Study.

Part I
Confession

Chapter One

Let's Tell the Truth

"I WAS at ESMA. I want to talk to you," he said when he came up to me in the Buenos Aires subway.

He was a short man with a big nose and a mustache, around forty-five, wearing blue pants and a striped, short-sleeved shirt, carrying a cheap portfolio. He looked like many of the survivors of the military dictatorship's most notorious secret concentration camp, who scramble to earn a living without ever freeing themselves from the bad dream. I thought he was one of them and told him I understood what he had been through.

~~"No, you don't understand. I'm one of Rolón's colleagues,"~~
he explained. ~~In other words, not victim but victimizer.~~

Lieutenant Commander Juan Carlos Rolón was one of the officers in the intelligence unit at the Navy School of Mechanics (best known by its Spanish acronym, ESMA), where noncommissioned officers are trained in technical specialties. Rolón and his comrade-in-arms Antonio Pernías were at the heart of one of

the major political crises of 1994. Carlos Menem, Argentina's president, decided to promote them both to the rank of captain (in the Argentine navy, the rank immediately below rear admiral). However, on the day the senate was to confirm their new rank, I came out with an account of their backgrounds in the Buenos Aires newspaper *Página/12*, where I publish a political column. I had been studying them for eighteen years, since 1976, when I wrote the first history of Argentina's dirty war.

~~In the 1980s, there were a number of important trials for human rights violations committed during the military regime of 1976 to 1983.~~ A federal court of appeals arrested Pernías in 1987 on the charge of having tortured eleven prisoners, most of them women. The case had tremendous repercussions because the prisoners in question were the initial nucleus of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who were abducted from inside the Church of the Holy Cross on Christmas Eve 1977. Another navy officer, Alfredo Astiz, had infiltrated the group, pretending to be the brother of a disappeared person, and gave the signal for the abduction to begin by kissing one of the women. Among the group were two French nuns Alice Domon and Leonie Duquet. After being tortured, all of them were killed. The French court of appeals in Paris sentenced Astiz to life imprisonment, making him the only member of the Argentine military who cannot leave Argentina, even to wage war, without being arrested by the police.

Pernías was also accused of the murder of a group of priests in St. Patrick's Church, another of the most bloodcurdling cases of the 1970s. Rolón was investigated for the abduction of a woman who died resisting police who were trying to take her from her home. He was also head of the ESMA intelligence unit that attempted to brainwash a group of prisoners so that, under the threat of death, they would work to further the political career of Admiral Emilio Massera, a member of the military junta who wished to become a charismatic leader like former president Juan De Peron.

Argentina's president at the time, Raúl Alfonsín, in response to the uprising of an army group opposed to the prosecutions, passed two laws that saved Rolón and Pernías from jail. ~~The law, known as Full Stop (*Punto Final*), kept Rolón's case from coming to trial by making it impossible to prosecute cases that were not brought to the courts by a certain date. After half a year in jail, Pernías was set free by another law, Due Obedience (*Obediencia Debida*), which stated that officers of a certain rank and below were to be presumed by law to have been ignorant of the illegality of the orders they carried out.~~

In the meantime, the National Commission on the Disappeared, appointed by the president at the end of the dictatorship and made up of a dozen people from scientific, cultural, religious, and political spheres, had registered other accusations against the two. In Venezuela, Pernías and Rolón had attempted to kidnap the industrial tycoon Julio Broner. Pernías was planning to shoot darts coated with a drug that would paralyze Broner. In order to determine the exact dosage, he tested his darts on a prisoner who never reappeared alive. Pernías was also an instructor of a course on "antisubversive fighting" for torturers from Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Brazil, and Guatemala. He started a real estate agency to sell property robbed from prisoners whose families were blackmailed into signing it over. Once the apartments were sold, the prisoners were killed.

Up to this point, the cases against Pernías and Rolón resembled a long succession of cases involving military promotions, going back to the end of the dictatorship. The press scrutinized the past behavior of the nominees and human rights organizations made their objections known to the Senate, which was simultaneously pressured to confirm the promotions by the government and the chiefs of staff of the three branches of the military. But this time something was different. Pernías and Rolón felt the navy had abandoned them; they decided to talk and unleashed a chain reaction. Until then, the military had denied

the facts of the dirty war, discrediting witnesses by accusing them of continuing their political battle against the armed forces by other means.

Pernías broke with tradition by acknowledging that torture was the weapon of choice in a lawless war, admitting that the navy had participated in the abduction and murder of the French nuns, and suggesting that the priests in St. Patrick's had been killed by the federal police. Rolón's statement was less direct. He said that he would never under any circumstances give orders like the ones he had obeyed and that they "were wrong," but were handed down by "commanding officers who are now admirals, with the Senate's confirmation." He also let it be known that no one in the military had been able to keep his hands clean, because the navy had rotated all officers through the different task forces.

"Don't you think Rolón is getting shafted?" the man with the cheap portfolio asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Or do you think Rolón acted on his own initiative and we were some sort of rogue gang?"

"What were you, if not a gang?"

"Can a gang make use of naval installations, mobilize airplanes?"

"Airplanes?" So went this odd dialogue of questions and questions.

He opened the portfolio and took out a sheet of paper.

"Read this. It will interest you."

It was a notarized letter addressed to the chief of staff of the navy, Admiral Enrique Emilio Molina Pico. If the members of the Senate Confirmation Committee denied Pernías and Rolón their promotions, it said, they would, out of ignorance, be committing an injustice. For that reason the navy should inform the public of "the methods those in the highest ranks ordered used at the Navy School of Mechanics for arresting, interrogating,

and eliminating the enemy during the war against subversion and, if it exists, should publish the list of those inaccurately called the 'disappeared' (*desaparecidos*)."

"Eliminating the enemy?"

"Finish reading it."

"While stationed at ESMA, I carried out orders from commanding officers who are now admirals, with the confirmation of the Honorable Senate of the Nation." This phrase caught my attention. It was an indirect way of saying: all of us or none of us.

"Those are the very words Rolón used."

"Keep reading."

"I hereby inform you that should the aforementioned confirmations be denied, I will demand a full judicial inquiry so that the truth can triumph over hypocrisy once and for all." The letter was signed by Lieutenant Commander Adolfo Francisco Scilingo, the man with the cheap portfolio.

"I have here an acknowledgment of receipt signed by Videla's guard," he added.

When Menem pardoned the former military leaders in 1990 and former military President Jorge Rafael Videla demanded a full vindication as well, Scilingo took another letter to Videla's house in person. This time the letter detailed the kinds of truth Scilingo intended to reveal if his demands were not met.

"Read it, but don't worry about remembering the details. I'll give you a copy. You'll see that we did worse things than the Nazis."

Scilingo's text is chilling:

In 1977, as a lieutenant stationed at the Navy School of Mechanics (ESMA) with operative dependence on the First Corps of the army, when you were the commander-in-chief and in fulfillment of orders given by the Executive Power whose powers you then exercised, I participated in two aerial transports, the first with thirteen subversives aboard a Skyvan belonging to the coast guard, and the second with seventeen terrorists aboard an Electra belonging to naval aviation. The prisoners were told they were being taken to a prison in the

south and for that reason had to receive a vaccination. They received an initial dose of anesthetic, which was reinforced by another larger dose during the flight. Finally, in both cases, they were stripped naked and thrown into the waters of the South Atlantic from the planes during the flight. Personally, I have never been able to overcome the shock that the execution of that order caused me; despite the fact that we were in the middle of the dirty war, this method of executing the enemy doesn't seem to me to be a very ethical one for military men to employ, but I believed that I would find in you the timely public acknowledgment of your responsibility for these facts.

In response to the matter of the disappeared, you said that there are subversives living under assumed names, others who died and were buried as persons unknown, and, finally, you did not reject the possibility that certain excesses might have been committed by your subordinates. Where do I fit into that? Do you believe that the weekly transports were the result of unauthorized excesses? Let's put an end to the cynicism. Let's tell the truth. Let the list of the dead be known, even though at the time of their deaths you did not assume responsibility for having signed an order for their execution. The unjust sentence you say you carried out bore the signature of the president who ordered the trial, the signature of the prosecutor who sought the conviction, the signature of the judges who established the sentence. Whether or not their action was mistaken, all of them signed. We still bear the responsibility for thousands of disappeared persons without facing the facts or speaking the truth, and you talk about vindication. Vindication is not achieved by decree.

It ends by announcing to Videla that if he does not assume his responsibility, he, Scilingo, will publish the letter, "so that the truth can be known."

"What was Videla's answer?"

"He never answered me."

Scilingo had then sent a copy of this letter to Admiral Jorge Osvaldo Ferrer, whom President Menem has appointed as chief of staff of the navy. In it Scilingo argued that by accepting the pardon, the former military leaders had acknowledged that the verdict and life sentence given to Videla and Massera were not

politically motivated, as they had maintained during their trial. Therefore, their former subordinates "became the executors of orders that could be of a criminal nature." The Full Stop law freed them from any possibility of conviction, but "we are nevertheless responsible for the events in which we were participants," he wrote. He did not want to become responsible for a coverup "by not assuming the agency I had in cases of disappeared persons," and had resolved to present himself at the office of a federal prosecutor to make a declaration "so that it can be determined whether in the fulfillment of orders I have committed any illegal act."

As an officer of greater seniority than Commander Alfredo Aztiz, he also wished to make a declaration to the French judicial authorities "in order to explain the truth of the charges and achieve their just dismissal." Ferrer should order "the publication of the names of the subversives executed by members of the military, independently of the method that was used." Scilingo requested that his letter be brought to Menem's attention.

The sheaf of photocopies he took out of the portfolio included a second letter to Ferrer. Having received no response to the first one, he felt that he was not being led by his superiors but was being "used and cast aside." The Naval Military School "educated me to be a naval officer," but at the School of Mechanics "I was ordered to act outside of the law and transformed into a criminal." The attitude of his former superiors toward the amnesty "makes me an accomplice to a cover-up," he wrote.

The letter ended with a cryptic reference. He said that in civilian life he had made some serious mistakes "both in my personal conduct and at the corporate-financial level." He attributed them to the "pride, omnipotence, and excessive self-esteem I felt in dealing with civilians," acquired during the military dictatorship, "when I believed that both my commanding officers and myself were the saviors of the fatherland. The blows I have suffered have shown me that only truth, democracy, and justice are the true solution for our country."

He left a set of copies of these letters at the Military House of the Presidency, addressed to Menem. He asked for authorization to make a declaration to an Argentine federal prosecutor and to the French judicial authorities and to make his letter to Videla public. He also sought a private audience in which "to learn the thoughts of my commander in chief on the subject in question."

Menem never responded either.

Chapter Two

In Praise of Torture

MENEM DID not know who Pernías and Rolón were. Their names were included in the list of those nominated for promotions by his administration's secretary of military affairs, Vicente Massot, an ultrarightist Catholic intellectual who had written essays justifying Hitler and Franco. He had been a good friend of Admiral Rubén Jacinto Chamorro, the commander of the concentration camp where Pernías, Rolón, Astiz, and Scilingo carried out their orders. Massot, who used to visit Chamorro at ESMA, was the first civil servant in the constitutional government to defend torture publicly: "What we must ask ourselves, in Machiavellian terms, is up to what point, on certain occasions, does the end justify the means. A prisoner knows the location of a bomb about to explode that will kill hundreds of people. You could end up responsible for a bombing in an elementary school, for the death of hundreds of kids, because you refused to use torture," he said to justify the promotions.

The same riddle had been posed by General Albano Harguindeguy, minister of the interior under the dictatorship, to Miguel Hesayne, bishop of Patagonia. "No, General. The end does not justify the means," the austere priest answered. Hesayne predicted that "a victory at the cost of ignoble acts will quickly turn into a defeat because an armed force that practices torture will not escape unpunished by God the creator." He objected to the choice "of Machiavellian principles, rejecting those of Christ and his gospel" and said that "torture is immoral, regardless of who employs it."

In any case, the Machiavellian conjecture offered by Massot and Harguindeguy was based on false premises. Never did any Argentine guerrilla organization attack an elementary school. In the torture chambers, the prisoners were not interrogated about bombs set to go off, but about their next appointment with their comrades.

Menem frantically denied that he was attempting to reward the executioner of the French nuns. "That is a clumsy lie. At no time has the government favored promotions of that nature. There is no possibility of that." The officers who had participated in tortures would not be promoted, he promised.

His answer caused some consternation in the government and the navy. When told he had in fact signed the documents recommending the promotions, Menem was hostage to his own words. The Senate Confirmation Committee recommended that the promotions be rejected. Their opinion was about to be ratified in an open session, but the Government House called the leader of the bloc controlled by the powerful Justicialista Party, who requested that the committee reexamine the case.

It was agreed that Pernías and Rolón would appear in their own defense before the Senate Confirmation Committee. If their former commanders had been pardoned, those who had a much lesser responsibility should be promoted, opined the chairman of the committee, a Peronist senator who was his party's

defeated candidate for the vice presidency in 1983. Just when the seas started getting rough, however, the navy's top brass jumped ship: both the chief of staff, Molina Pico, and the assistant chief found reasons to be out of the country. Pernías and Rolón arrived at the Senate alone, wearing civilian clothing. Despite the fact that the Senate had not confirmed their promotions, they were already carrying out the duties of full captains. To exhibit their insignia in front of the senators would have been a provocation, and to disguise themselves in the uniforms of commanders would have diminished their authority in the eyes of their subordinates. The astonished senators, who did not even pressure them with questions, heard them acknowledge what the armed forces had been denying for almost two decades.

There was only one precedent. Retired Rear Admiral Horacio Mayorga had said in an article in 1985: "People are frightened and amazed by the Astiz affair. Do you know how many men like Astiz there were in the navy? Three hundred Astizes." The officers at ESMA were stern individuals who killed for the fatherland, "guys who never had a dime to their name. Astiz was a guy who had to go to the aircraft carrier to get a meal when his paycheck ran out. They were men who bet everything on what they were doing. Did they kill people? Of course. Everyone knows we eliminated them. Four or five were arrested, and how many of them were recuperable? One. And that was already a lot. The worst thing is what those men have to go through now. Many of them were thrown out of their houses by their wives, others lost their bearings completely, went crazy."

The speaker was not without a history. In 1972, Mayorga was the chief of the naval base in the southern city of Trelew, where one of the initial massacres, of two dozen political prisoners, was carried out on the pretext that they had attempted to escape. A decade later he offered to defend his two most notorious disciples, Chamorro and Astiz, before the military courts. Mayorga denied that at ESMA prisoners' fingers had been cut

off with a saw so they could not be identified by their fingerprints. "That's a lie! The only thing we had at ESMA was the electric cattle prod."

He also disagreed with the navy's conduct during that period. "In my opinion, they should have put the prisoners in front of firing squads in a soccer stadium, offered free Coca-Cola, and broadcast the whole thing on television. I did not agree with the way they were working in the shadows."

Mayorga tried to convince the United States writer Tina Rosenberg of the navy's humanitarianism: "You should be asking me why we wasted an injection on those prisoners. But we did." He said that he had seen terrible but unavoidable things done in order to win the war, and he compared the men of the navy with the members of the Uruguayan rugby team whose plane had crashed high in the Andes a decade earlier and who, in order to survive, had eaten the remains of their teammates who died in the crash. Nevertheless, "They weren't cannibals," Mayorga said.

The rear admiral presented himself as a good Christian who was troubled by his conscience. "We must condemn torture. The day we stop condemning torture—although we tortured—the day we become insensitive to mothers who lose their guerrilla sons—although they are guerillas—is the day we stop being human beings." But he denied that the gentlemen of the sea had raped or stolen. "People talk about us as if we are savages. . . . We are naval officials! We are not going to soil ourselves for a gold watch!"

This initial and lone exception to the pact of silence had no consequences. Mayorga had taken his retirement three years earlier and his statements had been made to a little-known magazine and to a writer who published them in a book only years later.

Pernías and Rolón, however, remained on active duty and were speaking in the first person as men who had personally

committed atrocities; the forum they chose was the national Senate, in front of journalists from all the media. The repercussions were immediate. The lawyer representing the families of the murdered nuns asked the committee to request precise information from Pernías as to where their remains were left, "in order to give them a Christian burial." Alain Juppé, the French minister of foreign affairs at that time, flew to Buenos Aires, met with the Argentine government as well as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and declared that, "when two French citizens are tortured and murdered for their way of thinking, France does not forget."

The murdered women had not belonged to a militaristic organization or even a political one; they were barely a dozen unarmed people whose only link was their kinship to others who had disappeared. At the moment the sacrilege took place, they were not setting off a bomb but collecting money in a church to publish a newspaper notice with a partial list of the disappeared.

Menem spent the first week of the crisis out of the country. His comments upon his return gave rise to as much astonishment as the revelations of the newly extroverted torturers: "There was a dirty war, and of the two parties involved in it, one was fighting for the rule of law and the others were constantly violating that law. I believe that the law triumphed on that occasion and we must keep that triumph intact." Pernías had just said that torture was the only law, and Menem chose to interpret this to mean that the law had triumphed.

The bloc of senators from the Justicialista Party decided not to consent to the promotions, but Menem only strengthened his support. At the army's headquarters he said, "Thanks to the presence of the armed forces, we triumphed in the dirty war." In front of the police force, he delivered an homage to Alberto Villar, the man who had organized the death squads that were active during the brief government of Isabelita Perón. And, during one of his daily radio broadcasts, he said that "above and

beyond the mistakes that were made, the subversive apparatus disappeared, and we owe that to the men of the armed forces.”

Menem’s vehement defense of their shadowy past astounded the armed forces themselves. That same week, the chief of staff of the army, Lieutenant General Martín Balza, had said, “Nothing can be done about the past. We can only work on the present and the future. We must study the past very carefully, in a spirit of self-criticism and humility.” Balza was the first chief of staff to express his loathing of the sinister logic that prevailed during the 1970s. “Ethics must always prevail. The end does not justify the means. There is no ethical justification of the ends when the procedures are illegitimate,” he proclaimed. By requesting that the two commanders be promoted, the naval leadership and the executive branch were obstructing the transition of the military institutions from the swamp of the terrorist state to a modern role, compatible with democratic order.

Not even Menem’s attempts to intervene lessened the impact of Pernías and Rolón’s pronouncements on the navy. With these two fundamental bricks removed, the whole wall of silence could collapse. Scilingo went to the post office and mailed his notarized letter to Molina Pico. If the navy was not going to tell the truth, this time he would.

Chapter Three *A Christian Death*

AT OUR first two meetings, Scilingo had told me his story. At the third, he was to document it. He arrived precisely at the time we had agreed upon. He hadn’t changed his mind. He brought along the photocopies of the letters he had promised me.

“Now you can be certain I’m not going to back away from this,” he said.

The only thing left was record his voice.

“Wait, don’t start the tape,” he resisted. “We have to prepare a list of questions today.”

“No, we’re going to record this.”

The tape began to turn. He reached out to stop it.

“Leave the tape recorder alone.”

Scilingo withdrew his hand. It was his turn to answer. He began the confession he had postponed for eighteen years.

“How did the orders to throw defenseless prisoners into the ocean come to you?”

“The first information I got about it was in 1976 from Admiral Luis María Mandía, who was the chief of naval operations, in front of the top ranking officers of all the units in the area of Puerto Belgrano (the Argentine Navy’s largest base). He stated that special military operations that would employ means appropriate to the circumstances were being planned in order to meet the demands of a fight against an unforeseen enemy in which standard operating procedures would prove inapplicable. Ever since the Colonial era, he explained, uniforms had been used to differentiate between the two factions in a conflict. Later, they served as camouflage on different types of terrain. Now we would use civilian clothing as camouflage within the civilian sphere. All the officers in the Puerto Belgrano region were there, in the base’s movie theater. Regarding the subversives who were condemned to death or who were to be eliminated, he commented that they were going to fly, and since there were people who have problems, some of them were not going to reach their destination. And he said that the Church authorities, at what level I don’t know, had been consulted to try and find a way that was Christian and not too violent.”

“Who sentenced them and how were they sentenced?”

“At ESMA, Admiral Chamorro was always number one. I don’t know if he consulted any other authority or if the decision came from him. For me, it wasn’t worth discussing. I imagine it was fully evaluated. We were convinced it was the most humanitarian thing to do, as Mendía said.”

“Did anyone ask Mendía any questions?”

“Yes.”

“What did they ask him?”

“I don’t remember. I think one of the questions was about the uniforms. That was something unexpected. Since it wasn’t a naval meeting, it had an impact.”

“Did Mendía present this as a decision that had been made?”

“It appeared in the navy’s written plans: special military oper-

ations. That was what he explained, what was planned there in terms of the institution’s operating structures. The 3.3 Task Force, which operated at the Navy School of Mechanics, was provided for there.

“A military order must be clear and precise. From what you are saying, Mendía transmitted a nebulous concept with an elliptical phrase.”

“It was a general description of the matter. He presented an overview of the situation. He didn’t give any details since that was done afterward in each unit.”

“You say it appeared in writing. But the flights do not appear in the naval plans that were made public later, during the 1985 trial.”

“No. What appeared in writing was “special military operations.”

“Specifically, how did the transports you mention in your letter to Videla take place?”

“The ones I participated in?”

“Yes. How did you receive the orders?”

“My immediate superior officer gave them to me. In mid-1977, while I was stationed at the Navy School of Mechanics, I was called in by the head of defense, Commander Adolfo Mario Arduino. He was third in command, but he acted as second after Captain Salvio Menéndez was wounded. Arduino informs me that I have to make a flight, that I have to present myself in Dorado, which was the command center where orders were given. It operated in the officers’ building. It was totally logical at that time, given that it was a rotating duty, and could be given to anyone—the whole navy was involved. It was an order and it was carried out. There was no doubt about it. It wasn’t something unusual or hidden. Arduino later became a vice admiral and chief of naval operations.”

“Nevertheless, in the task forces themselves, rank was not respected; the chain of command was broken.”

“They were commando groups. Afterward everything went back to normal, to the level of authority that corresponded to each one. They were secret operations.”

“No one ever paid much attention to the fact that a decision as serious as killing people did not come down by the normal procedure, approved and countersigned in a responsible fashion?”

“No. There isn’t an armed force in the world where all orders are delivered in writing; it would be impossible to command. The system that was established to eliminate the subversive elements was institutionally based. It could order execution by firing squad as easily as any other type of elimination. As you can imagine, airplanes are not deployed by a gang, but by an armed force. The orders we were receiving were extreme, but they made sense in the context of the war that was being fought—both those to arrest the enemy and those to eliminate the enemy.”

“No one ever asked why you weren’t given signed orders for a shooting to be carried out publicly, by firing squad?”

“Yes, it was one of the things that was brought up in the meeting with the chief of naval operations. What happened to the prisoners was not made known, in order to withhold information from the enemy and create uncertainty. That was the theoretical reason we were given. Time would prove that the real reason was something else, because many years later, during the trials, no one said what had happened.”

“You think that at that point they were already thinking about how to evade responsibility?”

“At that point, I don’t know. But they did evade responsibility later, I have no doubt about that. Why, up to this very moment, hasn’t the truth been made public, after twenty years? If the orders were all legal, what are they hiding? Why doesn’t Congress have all the facts in hand in order to decide whether to promote Rolón or Pernías or, soon, Astiz?”

“What happens when you show up at Dorado?”

“There’s an order on a blackboard indicating who will make up the convoy that is to go to the Buenos Aires military airport with the prisoners.”

“Did it say ‘convoy that is to go to the airport’?”

“I don’t remember the exact words, but it was the convoy that was going to the airport.

“In conversations among yourselves, how did you refer to this?”

“The flight.”

“The flight?”

“It was called a flight. It was normal, although now it seems like an aberration. Pernías and Rolón told the senators that the use of torture for extracting information from the enemy had been adopted as a standard practice, and this was too. Within that framework, caught up in the war we were convinced we were waging, it was one of the methodologies.”

“On the blackboard you saw your name and those of the others who were to go?”

“The assumed name.”

“You didn’t know each other’s real names?”

“Yes, everyone knew. In the navy we all know each other.”

“What was the point of using the cover names?”

“So the enemy wouldn’t find out who we were. Within the school there were subversives who were collaborating with us. In fact, when someone came in wearing a uniform, he was generally ordered to take his insignia off the collar so his rank couldn’t be identified.”

“Describe the next step to me.”

“I went to the basement, where the ones who were going to fly were. There was no one left lower down. They were informed that they were going to be transferred to the south and would be given a vaccination for that reason. They were given a vaccination—I mean a dose of something to knock them out, a sedative.

It made them drowsy.”

“A dose of what?”

“I don’t know. An injection.”

“Who administered it?”

“One of the doctors stationed there.”

“A navy doctor?”

“Yes. Then they were put on a navy truck, a green truck with a canopy. We went to the military airport, we entered from the back, and there we learned that it wasn’t a navy Electra but a Skyvan belonging to the coast guard which was going to make the flight. Since we couldn’t all fit on board, we divided the group that was going to fly, in half. I was only along as an errand boy. I don’t know why they put me in charge of the first flight. Two of us got on the plane: me and the man who was my boss and supervisor in the automobile shop, Lieutenant Vaca, who later turned out not to be a Lieutenant Vaca at all, but a civilian lawyer who had been hired, a cousin of (the task force’s chief of intelligence) Tigre Acosta. Then the subversives were carried out like zombies and loaded onto the airplane.”

“Do you continue to think of them as ‘subversives’ or are you using the term now because we are recording this?”

“I’m describing the facts as they were at that moment.”

“That’s why I changed the tense. Do you still think of them as subversives now?”

“No.”

“How would you describe them today?”

“Today, unfortunately, as things have played out, and since the military leaders keep hiding everything and not showing their faces, I think that both those who died in that way, because they were risking their lives, and we who were there, were two groups of useful idiots. I think they were using us. How many important subversives died? Who were the ones who died?”

“Who were they?”

“I don’t think anyone died who had any tremendous impor-

tance that could have affected. . . . Yes, the country was in a chaotic situation. But I’m telling you, today I think the problem could have been solved another way. That’s what I think today, and there was no need to kill them. They could have been hidden anywhere in the country. The armed forces weren’t the only ones responsible. A large part of the country consented to the barbarities that were being committed.”

“How was that consent expressed?”

“I don’t think society acted out of terror. I think that it appealed to the armed forces or that it backed what they did. A certain excessiveness in the procedures, as it was called at the time, was not rejected. It was accepted. Very few voices were raised against it. If the majority of the population had demonstrated against it, things would have been different. Today I’m telling you that it was a barbaric thing. At that time we were totally convinced of what we were doing. The way we had internalized it, with the situation we were living through in this country, it would be a total lie if I told you that I wouldn’t do it again under the same conditions. I would be a hypocrite. When I did what I did I was convinced they were subversives. What happens is that, as I tell you about this right now—and I’m telling you about it in detail, since you ask me to and I believe the truth must be known—don’t think that it makes me very happy or that it makes me feel very good. Right now I can’t say that they were subversives. They were human beings. We were so deeply convinced that no one questioned it. There was no other option, as Rolón said in the Senate. Most of the men participated in a flight. It was done in order to rotate people, a kind of communion.”

“What did that communion consist of?”

“It was something that you had to do. I don’t know what executioners go through when they have to kill, to drop the blade or pull the switch on the electric chair. No one liked to do it, it wasn’t a pleasant thing. But it was done, and it was understood that this

was the best way. It wasn't discussed. It was something supreme that was done for the sake of the country. A supreme act. It's very difficult to understand and to explain, especially after so much time has gone by and I'm seeing things differently.

"The word 'communion' has a mystical, charismatic component."

"Yes, that's how it was. When the order was received, it wasn't spoken of again. It was carried out automatically."

"Everyone participated?"

"They were rotated through from all over the country. A few may have stayed out of it, but only by chance. If it had been a small group—but it wasn't, it was the whole navy. ESMA had its permanent staff, the task force, which was assigned there indefinitely, and another temporary group that stayed for three months. Moreover, officers from across the country were sent to ESMA on assignment, for a weekend or a day. The flights were on Wednesdays. The staff went out and executed legal orders, and they didn't kill or murder. They captured and handed over. The brainwashing was total. The people who were picked up were interrogated in half an hour—there wasn't any more time than that—and then Chamorro decided who was going to die."

"What was the prisoners' reaction when they were told about the vaccination and the transfer?"

"They were glad."

"They didn't suspect what was going on?"

"Not at all."

"How long did it take for the drug to make them drowsy?"

"A short time."

"During the trip?"

"No, before leaving."

"The truck went as part of a convoy—"

"—with other vehicles acting as an escort. The prisoners were like zombies."

"But they could move in order to board the plane."

"This line of questioning is somewhat gruesome, totally gruesome. It's a fact, real and concrete. If you want me to describe it to you, I'll describe it to you."

"It's unavoidable. You mention it in the letter to Videla."

"Because it's the truth, it's what happened. Or do you have some doubt about that?"

"None whatsoever. Could they walk onto the airplane despite the drug?"

"No. They had to be helped."

"They were not aware of what was happening?"

"I have no doubt about that. No one was aware he was going to die."

"The fact that they had received what they thought was a vaccination and they could feel that they were becoming like zombies didn't make them . . ."

"No, no, no."

"The flight takes off. What happens then?"

"I don't feel like going on."

This time he succeeded in turning off the tape recorder.

"Why don't you want to go on?"

"Because I don't. Next time."

With the tape recorder off, he relaxes. He grows animated again when his favorite subject is brought up and he agrees to continue recording.

"You said that if Pernías, Rolón and Astiz cannot be promoted, then those with greater seniority should not have been promoted either."

"As far as I'm concerned, from Admiral Massera down to the most recent one, who I think was Astiz, no one could have stayed in the navy. It was all by rotation. Everyone in the navy knew, and in some cases a few men, who we thought were traitors, left. It was unavoidable. It was not spoken of. We were all convinced it was the best thing that could be done for the country, and furthermore these were military orders. Now look at the results."

"Yes."

"Not the results of the murders that were committed, but of all those who didn't speak. I'm not saying that Arduino shouldn't have been made a vice admiral, because I am no one to pass judgment on him. But if *he* can be, then Rolón can be. The chief of staff, Admiral Molina Pico, I don't know why he's afraid and hides it. It must be because everything we did was outside the law. In that case we're criminals and they all have to go. That's the issue. That's what I think.

"What was Molina Pico's participation during that period?"

"I don't know. But he must have had something to do with it. At the very least he was in the navy. He wasn't twittering around in a cloud of little birds."

"In the Navy School of Mechanics, were there any crews that did not rotate?"

"There was a permanent group in Dorado and a group that rotated every three months, that came from different navy posts."

"Was it only the permanent group in Dorado that participated in the flights?"

"No, no. It was completely a rotating duty. It was the whole navy, it wasn't a gang."

"Including those who were permanently stationed at the school?"

"Yes."

"Those who came for three months also participated?"

"Not only did those who were there for three months participate, but also others who were stationed elsewhere and who were sent to take part in flights, specifically. In other words, to involve them in it. The whole navy was involved in the fight against the subversives, or in the—now I don't know what it was. Because if it was an institutional fight against subversion, I don't know what there is to hide."

"You keep repeating that you weren't a gang."

"If you believe that a gang of ten guys can succeed in mobilizing airplanes belonging to the coast guard and the navy, you're a little bit mistaken. It was an armed force that was mobilizing. The big difference between us is that you call it a gang. I say that the navy acted as the navy, until I started having doubts. Why isn't the truth being told, if we were acting as the Argentine Navy, if we were carrying out orders handed down in perfectly correct fashion through the chain of command? The whole navy knew what was being done."

"The Sicilian Mafia obeyed the orders of Totó Riina. Obeying orders alone is not the qualifying characteristic of an institution."

"But if you are part of an armed organization, you're always receiving orders, carrying out orders, and giving orders. In the navy there are no comrades, there are men with greater and lesser seniority."

"But those orders must be legal."

"These were legal orders. In the navy there's no such thing as orders that aren't legal. Now if you ask me what I think today, it's different—but at that time I had no doubt."

"What do you think today?"

"If they had been legal orders, no one would be ashamed of telling everyone what happened, how the fight was carried on. However, this strange concealment or cover-up, this mystery. . . Someone said something about a blood pact, but there was no pact. No one ever told me I couldn't talk about it. How could I accept it if someone were to tell me I couldn't talk about it? It's acceptable not to speak, because these are wartime secrets, for a given period of time. But once the war is over, this belongs to history, and I even think it does the republic good to know what was done—and also it is imperative that the lists of those brought down or killed be given out, by whatever system, so that once and for all we can be done with this bizarre situation of disappeared people."

"Who has those lists?"

"I don't know who has them right now. But within the institutional framework, not at the level of a gang, the information came down through the command that, in one of the last meetings of the military junta, then-admiral Massera, before leaving, had stated that it was indispensable to make known the list of the disappeared. According to what we were told through the chain of command, the other members of the junta, and Videla especially, rejected this idea."

"As you understand it, do such lists exist?"

"They have to exist. At that time they existed. I believe that the chiefs of staff must have them. That is the logical thing. Lists of the dead can't be thrown out, if it's true that the military leadership acted as I had believed they did. Now if, as I suspect, they acted in a strange, odd and shadowy way, because now we aren't telling the truth . . . I don't know. . . . It may be that some chief of staff has thrown them out. It would be interesting if that were made public. I brought this up in some of my letters, but never got an answer.

"You insist that they were not a gang. But in one of your letters you say that in the Navy School of Mechanics you were ordered to act outside the law and were made into a criminal."

"Yes. You are asking me what we did. And I was totally convinced. When Alfonsín takes power, the juntas are put on trial. They say it's a political problem. They are found guilty and sentenced. They insist that it is a political problem. But afterward they are pardoned and they accept that without a problem. So what happened with everything that went on before? If the pardon is accepted, that means that the sentence is accepted, along with everything that happened before, the trial. It means that everything is true and none of it was a political game. It means that they were acting outside the law."

"But you didn't need them to accept the pardon in order to know that they were acting outside the law and that the statements made during the trial were true. The survivors talked

about exactly the same thing you lived through. All the stories of the victims and the human rights organizations that were heard during the trial coincide with your story."

"Did Videla say that?"

"No."

"And why didn't he say it?"

"Why do you think he didn't say it?"

"It's hard for me to accept it. If you ask me to define for you whether we were acting within or outside of the law, I believe we were acting like common criminals. It's very hard for me to accept that, but the others demonstrated it to me. Admiral Molina Pico doesn't talk about it, Admiral Ferrer doesn't talk about it. I write them and they don't answer. If these were acts of war and military orders, why don't they answer? I don't understand. My doubts aren't just for the sake of doubting."

"At that time, no one had a moment's doubt about the legitimacy of the orders to throw prisoners into the sea from an airplane in flight? That didn't conflict with your Christian background, your military education?"

"The few men who left the navy obviously were opposed to it. Almost all of us thought that we were traitors—I mean, that they were traitors."

"How many do you know of who left?"

"(Commander Jorge) Búsico and another one whose name I don't remember."

"Only two. That indicates a serious lapse in all of your educations."

"No, no, no. I don't believe so. Because if the armed forces are what they must be, you have to have total confidence in your superior officer. Perhaps it's difficult for you to understand it, but the logical thing is not to doubt your superior. If you're going to stop and analyze every single order. . . ."

"But this is not a technical problem."

"No, it's not technical. But all of us were convinced that we

were involved in a different kind of war, for which we were not prepared, and that we were using the means we had at hand, that the enemy continually had good information and we had to deny them that information. From the religious point of view, talked over with chaplains, it was accepted."

"The chaplains approved of the method?"

"Yes. After my first flight, despite everything I'm telling you, it was very hard for me to accept it on a personal level. After returning, although I might coldly have thought everything was fine, that was not the reality inside me. I believe all human beings have this problem; if I had had to shoot someone, I would have felt the same way. I don't think any human being takes pleasure in killing another. The next day I didn't feel very good and I was talking with the chaplain of the school, who found a Christian explanation for it. I don't know if it comforted me, but at least it made me feel better."

"What was the Christian explanation?"

"I don't remember very well, but he was telling me that it was a Christian death, because they didn't suffer, because it wasn't traumatic, that they had to be eliminated, that war was war and even the Bible provided for eliminating the weeds from the wheat field. He gave me some support."

"Other colleagues of yours were also disturbed?"

"At heart, all of us were disturbed."

"But you talked among yourselves?"

"It was taboo."

"You went, threw twenty living people into the ocean, came back, and didn't talk about it among yourselves?"

"No."

"You picked up where you had left off, as if it hadn't existed."

"Yes. Everyone wants to erase it from their minds. I can't."

"What do you think, did each one talk about it at home, with his family?"

"I don't know."

"Did you talk about it with your family?"

"Little by little. The only person I really talked it over with—little by little, because it was hard for me—was my wife. After some time had gone by, I talked about it with two civilian friends. Fundamentally, I wanted one of my superiors to tell the public what happened during that period. That is the key issue. If what I say is true, if we acted within acceptable military parameters, carrying out orders, and there is no doubt that everything was correct, why is it being hidden? But you tell me we acted as a gang.

"You acted as a gang and did things that go against the laws of war, international conventions, Christian morality, Jewish morality, Islamic morality."

"Shooting someone is immoral too. Or is it better? Who suffers more, the one who knows he is going to be shot or the one who dies by our method?"

"The right to know that he is going to die cannot be denied any human being. It is a fundamental measure of respect for human dignity, even in an extreme situation."

"I agree with you about that. If I were on the other side, I would want to know. You're right. At that time I didn't think so. I thought it was true, all that about. . ."

"Don't you think that doing it in that way betrays, apart from everything else, an enormous cowardice, avoiding the gaze of the person who is going to be killed, carrying them off happy, full of illusions, in order to be able to come back afterward and pretend nothing happened, in order not to have to remember a scream or a gaze?"

"When you put it that way, it could be. It wasn't a normal act—today I have no doubt of that. I condemn it, and not because I want to justify myself. I think it is unjustifiable. But I also think it is unjustifiable to go on hiding it. I have criticized the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo a lot, and I've thought of them as my enemies. But if what happened to the Mothers of the Plaza

de Mayo had happened to me, (their leader) Hebe Bonafini wouldn't have amounted to a hill of beans next to me."

"I don't think so. The mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are much braver than you are."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of the life you've each lived."

"I'm saying if I were in their place."

"You would have stayed home."

"That's what you think."

"Yes."

"I don't agree. I don't think there could be a greater aberration for a parent than to have a disappeared child. A child is alive or dead, but there's no such thing as 'disappeared.' And that is the fault of the armed forces."

"And this did not pass through anyone's head at the time you were doing it?"

"No."

"Then apart from being a gang of criminals, you were sick. Now you're saying it in all clarity: an aberration that was the fault of the armed forces."

"That aberration is the responsibility of the armed forces and now also of the government, which must demand that they make public the list of the dead. Don't misunderstand what I am saying about the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. I don't know if I would have had the courage they had."

"There isn't a single member of the Argentine military who has had the courage the mothers had."

"That is your political assessment, which is irrelevant. Why do you say that?"

"Because of what the mothers did and what the military did. While you were throwing defenseless people out of airplanes, they went out under the most adverse conditions to call for justice. That is much more courageous."

"Don't misinterpret me."

"At the Navy School of Mechanics, were records kept?"

"It was perfectly structured. It was a military organization, not a gang as you say."

"It was a gang with account books."

"That's what you say."

"Did you have record books?"

"They had records of everything. It wasn't a record of dead people. It was within the military organization. Your interpretation is that ESMA was an armed group. Do you mean to separate the navy from ESMA or ESMA from the navy?"

"No."

"You're saying that the gang was the whole navy?"

"Yes."

"I agree with you on that. At that time it wasn't like that. If you say that the whole navy was involved in it, then can some be promoted and others not? Can the Senate promote some and not others? Does it have all the facts in hand with which to make that judgment? Were there one, two, or three men who tortured or killed while the rest didn't?"

"You're telling me that all of you tortured and killed?"

"No. All of us were part of the navy when that was being done, and we were rotated through different tasks. In a war, one guy cleans, another guy cooks, other guys kill. But that doesn't mean that they weren't all in the war, or in a gang, as you say and as the navy authorities make me feel by not telling the truth."

"But cooking isn't the same thing as torturing."

"When you're in a war, you don't think about that. It's the enemy. Otherwise, explain to me why the navy acted that way. At the War Academy, do they educate murderers to fight against defenseless civilians?"

"You say it in your letter: 'They made me a criminal.'"

"Because time demonstrated, with the attitudes of the superior officers when they hid all of it, that they were acting in a strange way. If you carry out orders and enough time goes by

that they are no longer secret for operative reasons, and they are still being hidden or even directly lied about—as Videla did when he said that he understood that certain subversives had left the country, others might have died unidentified, and that there might have been some excesses—this is lying in a treacherous way. And in the context of that lie, I say we were transformed into criminals. Because all those of us who were subordinates within the naval organizations believed that these were serious and coherent orders. But then the truth is hidden. Why is it hidden? It's hidden when something is being done that is not appropriate. Why do you think they didn't answer my letters?"

"Because they don't have an answer to give you. You were saying that the Senate doesn't have all the facts of the case in hand. It has a lot of them and could have more, but Pernías and Rolón are the first protagonists who are beginning to talk about the facts. Until now, this was known only from the victims, the human rights organizations, and the courts. No officer had ever said in the first person what Pernías said, that torture was the tool that was used during interrogations."

"But it isn't appropriate for a commander to talk about that subject."

"All the admirals who gave the orders came before the courts and none of them admitted it."

"Why?"

"Out of cowardice. Or do you have another explanation?"

"No. So my letter is right, and we were acting like criminals."

"Of course. How did you decide to write the first letter?"

"For me, the declaration Videla made when he was released from prison with the pardon was unacceptable. I took the letter to his house personally and gave it to the guard, who signed a receipt for me. Videla never answered me. So I informed Admiral Ferrer by letter. When I got tired of getting no response from my superiors, I sent another letter, with photocopies of all the preceding ones, to the president of the nation in his role as commander-in-chief of the

armed forces. It was received by Brigadier General Andrés Antonietti, who was director of the Military House of the Presidency."

"What happened?"

"They never answered me. From what I know, President Menem read the letter and said to Antonietti, 'Stop this madman.' Clearly it's a difficult issue. I didn't find anyone to support me. I spoke with other officers, but it's a very complicated issue."

"What did you say to them?"

"That once and for all this had to be brought to light, that the issue had to be closed by telling the truth. Not in order to defend ourselves or to justify ourselves, but this is the harsh reality. The term 'disappeared' is unacceptable to me, and on top of that it falls on my shoulders. Because I didn't make anyone disappear, nor did anyone else in the navy. In a war, the enemy was eliminated; it could also have been done by shooting them. Who has made them into 'the disappeared'? Those who have the responsibility for the leadership of the navy and the government. The issue comes up again with the nonpromotion of Captains Pernías and Rolón, which I consider to be the greatest injustice. And I will clarify that I have not spoken personally with them for a very long time. I don't even know what they think of my letters. When Astiz learned about my efforts to make a declaration at the French embassy and prove that an injustice was being committed, he sent someone to ask me not to raise a fuss, because he had been promised that his situation would be worked out discreetly. I never thought the silence could go so far as to allow the Senate Confirmation Committee, for lack of information, to commit an injustice, since it was an issue for the entire navy; and from Admiral Massera down to the lowest lieutenant junior grade who participated, no one should be promoted if Pernías and Rolón are not promoted."

"You're saying that all navy officers participated in kidnapping, torture, and clandestine executions?"

"No navy officer participated in kidnapping, torture, and

clandestine eliminations. The entire navy participated in detentions, interrogations, and the elimination of the subversives, which could have been done by various methods. You know that it would have been ridiculous to conduct searches with a judicial warrant; with a very basic interrogation technique we would never have extracted any kind of information; and it would have been the same to eliminate them by shooting them, if that were the decision passed down through the chain of command. Not that I want to justify myself or justify those who were there.”

“You participated in torture sessions?”

“No. But I am a participant in the issue, I had no doubt that they were going on. I saw an interrogation.”

“So you participated.”

“No, no, no. I observed.”

“What does that mean, to observe an interrogation? You were part of it.”

“No, no, no, because I didn’t interrogate or anything. I went there—I watched it for a reason I’ll tell you about in time.”

“You had to talk to someone who was there?”

“No. It was a circumstantial matter that made me enter the place where a person was being interrogated.”

“You wanted to listen to the interrogation, the person interested you?”

“No, I had a personal doubt that maybe I’ll tell you about later.”

“You say you did not participate in torture sessions.”

“But do you think that I didn’t know that torture was used in the interrogations, or do you by any chance believe there was anyone in the navy who didn’t know?”

“Knowing is one thing, participating is another.”

“What’s the difference? They aren’t different things. If you know it isn’t right, even if you don’t participate, you have to resign, or bring it up.”

“But it isn’t the same thing to know something is happening and to do it yourself.”

“It was the normal method and all of us had taken it upon ourselves, so that the responsibility is unavoidable for all of us. It’s different if you’re outside and the whole thing is totally foreign to you, you don’t have anything to do with it, you could denounce it. But if you’re inside and you accept it, you’re an accomplice. All of us, in one way or another, participated. The responsibility of those who did not participate directly can’t be diminished.”

“What percentage did not participate directly?”

“I don’t know. Very few men participated directly in interrogations. Did you know that the guys who tortured were from the coast guard and the police?”*

“Under the attentive gaze and the orders of the gentlemen of the sea, who didn’t dirty their hands with it.”

“A lot of men participated in operations, as you say, in kidnappings, which were detentions, because they were rotated. Even on weekends, in addition to those who were rotated, officers came from various posts to carry out certain tasks. As for the flights, I don’t know what percentage flew or did not fly.”

“Torture was the specialty of a few men?”

“Of those who interrogated the prisoners. I don’t think it’s so easy to torture.”

“For technical reasons?”

“Yes. I know of two men who interrogated. There were men who needed information, and they asked those who did the interrogations for it. But you’re focusing on torture, as if only those who applied torture were responsible. Not at all. All of us bore the same responsibility. What do you want to do, justify the men who were in the navy at that time?”

* Scilingo’s statement here does not coincide with the testimony of the former prisoners; those who wielded the weapon of choice in the dirty war were navy officers. Scilingo was unaware of this because his duties were primarily logistical and did not involve much intelligence work.

"No. I want to get a full description of what happened, to know everything you know. Everyone participated in the flights, or was that the specialty of a few people, too?"

"It was a rotating duty. I don't know if 100 percent of the navy participated, but each time there was a flight, different people went along. There are top ranking officers who participated in flights and were promoted. Why not Rolón? All of the facts must be assembled and made known, because the country must know what happened. This is the true history. Here are the living and here are the sufferers, and I have to return to the issue of the disappeared, which is aberrant. The country has done very little.

"Apart from the flights, what were your duties?"

"I was in the street. I was chief of automotive services for ESMA, in charge of 202 vehicles. Around fifty of them belonged to the navy. The others turned up. . ."

"Stolen in the street. . ."

"That's what you say. They were recuperated."

"It was also an institutional decision for those cars to turn up?"

"Of course. It's like this: if a tank was needed, a tank was found, and if a Ford Falcon was needed, a Ford Falcon was found. The objective was to destroy the enemy, by whatever means and with the materials that were required. There was a system by which all the vehicles that were needed were acquired."

"How did they get them? The officers hot-wired them in the street and drove them off?"

"Noooo. The officers didn't do that kind of work."

"The noncommissioned officers?"

"I don't know."

"What? The chief of automotive services doesn't know?"

"They brought the vehicles to me. Clearly they were not legitimately acquired vehicles. This vehicle must be transformed, repainted green. Those orders were given to me by Lieutenant Vaca—alias Lieutenant Vaca. And it was done."

"And the license plate had to be changed."

"No. The license plate was something automotive services didn't deal with. It was changed at the parking lot. That was one of Vaca's jobs. So many vehicles and spare parts were moving through that there was a lot of money at stake. The money was handled by the accounting department, but there was a lack of control. I had to find a new shop chief, who ended up becoming a noncommissioned officer in the army. Don Juan he was called, a brilliant man. He tried to put things on such a serious footing that they got out of hand. One problem was that we couldn't keep track of the vehicles by their license plates because they changed the plates permanently. It was a year like no other, what do you want me to say. Automotive services was no longer organized like a military shop, but like a civilian one. We even had Ford manuals there because of the number of Fords. Civilian personnel who were strangers to the navy were hired. This caused some problems because sometimes the vehicles arrived all bloody and the civilians weren't used to that. It was a normal shop."

"What was the F-100 Swat van, which was used for mobile torture?"

"It wasn't used for mobile torture. It wasn't like that at all."

"With bunkbeds. . ."

"It was for intelligence-gathering purposes. A male or female subversive almost always went along to point out people, and they had to spend hours and hours huddled up in some hiding place waiting for the person. It was a little motor home. I can tell you this because it was in the shop many times. It had air conditioning and other systems for carrying out a lengthy intelligence-gathering mission in a nonidentifiable way. But it didn't have anything for torture. Intelligence-gathering isn't torture, it's obtaining information from the enemy."

"What was your cover name?"

"I don't remember."

"I don't believe that."

"I think it was Puma, or something like that. But I'm not sure. Most of the time I was in uniform with automotive services, I had to be visible. I participated in operations, but not very many. I wasn't dressed in civilian clothes all day. Perhaps the fact that I spent so much time in uniform makes me hypercritical of some things."

"Did you also participate in operations in which people were kidnapped?"

"I participated in one. I was involved in logistical matters only, but I participated in one. You say 'kidnapped,' but then it was 'detention of persons.'"

"What was it like?"

"The van that you mentioned was there, with people who were going to finger someone. There was going to be a meeting and they identified the person who was to be arrested and he was taken prisoner."

"How was he taken prisoner?"

"When he realized what was going on, the bullets started to fly. He resisted, they had to shoot at him and he was wounded. He got a bullet in the hip. I was the one who had to drive him in an ambulance to the naval hospital, where they operated on him to remove the bullet."

"Afterward what happened to that person?"

"I don't know what happened. He was probably interrogated and the rest."

"You don't know who he is?"

"I think he's the leader of the cell that tried to blow up the presidential airplane. I had a chance to talk to him in the ambulance. It was a conversation between two confirmed enemies. I don't know which of us was more convinced of what he was doing. He was very firm, very serious. Someone to be respected. He always stayed in my mind. I think he was a diver, and from what he said then he had been trained at Puerto Madryn (in the extreme south of Argentina)."

"How old was he?"

"In his early thirties."

"From your description, he could be Alfredo Nicoletti, who was arrested last year with the supergang after having robbed an armored car."

He looks at the tape recorder. He sees that it's running, and only makes a gesture with his thumb toward the ceiling, while shaking his head. He hesitates before deciding to leave his words on the tape.

"I don't think it could be him, because afterward he disappeared. So much guilt is placed on Astiz, but the group delivers the prisoner there and doesn't know what happens afterward. . ."

He tried to change the subject.

"You did know what happened. You did know that they were interrogated with torture and then thrown out of airplanes."

"Yes, but what I mean is that Astiz. . . What is he being accused of? Of having kidnapped, tortured, and killed. You realize that it was the Argentine navy that detained, interrogated, and eliminated. The prisoner is handed over in Dorado, and from then on the intelligence people take over, to interrogate him and the rest."

"If the navy were to inform the confirmation committee of everything, what do you think would happen? Would they say, 'Ah, no, if that's how it is then we have to promote Pernias and Astiz?'"

"They may say no, but then they would have to evaluate him along with the others. They can't have a double standard."

"What standard do you think they should employ?"

"I don't know. Let the confirmation committee decide. Either all of them go or all of them are promoted. It's that simple."

"And what do you think, should they all go or should they all be promoted?"

"It doesn't make sense for all of them to go."

"So all of them would have to be promoted?"

"All those who passed through the normal screening procedures should be promoted. They should not be held up because of political problems."

"But this is not a political problem. They would have to promote all of those who participated?"

"What's the difference between Lieutenant X and Lieutenant Rolón?"

"You're the one who knows."

"There is none. At some moment Rolón's name was leaked, but there are others who may have done worse things, from the human point of view, let's say. Rolón was in the intelligence office. I doubt whether he ever made a flight. Who is going to measure this? The confirmation committee could, if it had all the evidence in hand. You saw that the two of them went to make their declaration alone. That struck me. Someone must have decided to do it that way. I can't imagine a similar case in the army, a lieutenant colonel going alone and out of uniform to make a declaration before the confirmation committee without a superior officer at his side to advise him. It lends credence to what you are saying, that they were all gangsters. These are things that cause me so much doubt that I don't know who is right, you or me."

"To get rid of the gang, what rank would be the dividing line?"

"Commander."

"From commander on up, they all participated."

"Yes."

"What operative consequences would it have to retire them all?"

"I don't think that beheading an armed force in such a traumatic way would be very logical."

"You believe that it must be established that all of them participated and consequently no one can be sanctioned."

"I can't even state an opinion about a decision like that. It

completely exceeds what I can say. It should be analyzed at the highest political level."

"But what is your motivation? In one of your letters, you offer to make a declaration on Astiz's behalf at the French embassy."

"Astiz was a lieutenant junior grade. He was carrying out orders. As much of a gang as you say there was, it's unthinkable that a lieutenant junior grade could have made decisions like those attributed to Astiz. He was carrying out orders—we can't call him a gangster. No one went to tell the French courts the truth."

"Astiz didn't tell the truth either."

"He would have been held prisoner there."

"He could have said it here."

"Astiz cannot make a public declaration. He's on active duty, he has to ask for authorization."

"But he was put on trial in Argentina and he made a declaration."

"They must have given him orders about what he had to say. Because the gang, as you say, which for me is not a gang at all, was managed that way, by authorizations, carrying out orders. You see that I am asking for authorization."

"And no one answers you."

"Do you know why they didn't pardon Astiz? Because he infiltrated the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. But you have to have balls to do that."

"To hand over a dozen old women and nuns you don't need any courage at all, it's an act of cowardice."

"But do you know what they would have done to him if he had been discovered?"

"They would have thrown him out of the group. What courage did he need to hand them over?"

"But, were they alone? If you are given the order to infiltrate a certain place in order to determine certain things. . . For you, nothing was happening in the country?"

"But what possible risk was Mr. Astiz running by infiltrating a group of family members of disappeared persons who were collecting money in order to publish a notice in the newspaper at Christmas, trying to reconstruct, with all the difficulties faced by those who do not have the power that you people had, the list of the disappeared that you yourself say the gang should have published?"

"No, not the gang, the navy. I say that now, but at that moment perhaps it wasn't appropriate to publish it. So many unconventional methods were used because the war was not conventional. It was a matter of withholding information from the enemy, creating uncertainty as to what had happened to their prisoners, or what you call abductees. The logical thing would have been to inform the public of what happened and who the dead were before President Alfonsín took power. Information doesn't bring anything to an end. It won't bring back to life those who died on either side. There may be wounds, and who knows how much time it will take for them to close. However many amnesty laws are passed, by decree or by communiqué, this issue is not resolved. But how different it would have been if the truth had been known, if the disappeared had been eliminated by being transformed into the dead. Do you remember who said that the disappeared did not exist? (The former president of the Radical Civic Union, Ricardo) Balbín. Balbín said, 'What disappeared? They're all dead.' Nevertheless, they remain the disappeared."

"If Astiz had been discovered as he was infiltrating the Church of the Holy Cross, what do you think would have happened?"

"They could have killed him."

"Who?"

"What do you mean, who?"

"The nuns?"

"No, no, but do you think they were alone, alone, alone?"

"And what do you think?"

"I think that the subversive groups were supporting them."

"Supporting them? How? Do you believe they were a military organization equal to yours? It appears to me that you have a very distorted vision of the facts. Many years have gone by and there hasn't been a single instance of personal vengeance against anyone."

"But some members of the military were kidnapped at that time."

"How many?"

"I don't know."

"Two, three cases. General Pita, Lieutenant Colonel Del Valle Larrabure, Admiral Alemán, who else?"

"The next time we see each other I'll see if I can get some information about this. I have it at home."

"What were the personal and corporate-financial mistakes you say you made out of excessive pride when you left the navy?"

"I got involved with some people who. . . But because I was starving to death."

"Were you convicted of anything?"

"Yes. Fraud."

"What happened?"

"When I retired, I launched the first big video rental store in Bahía Blanca (the city in the province of Buenos Aires where the largest naval base is located). After that I set up the first cable television system, with some members of my family. My economic situation improved enormously, very rapidly, and as quickly as I rose, I fell. I was ruined and from there I kind of stumbled around until I recuperated."

"What was the conviction of fraud for?"

"I was in Buenos Aires, and I introduced a civilian friend to a company that produced videos. He paid for seven video cassettes with a check postdated thirty days later. And they discovered that the account, which was in his name, was closed. They charged me as his accomplice. I paid for the seven video cassettes, but the trial went on. The defense lawyer asked in Bahía Blanca for docu-

ments certifying that I was the owner of a video rental store, but the registries for the whole province are in the city of La Plata, and the judge sentenced me stating that I was never able to prove that I was the owner of a video company. But now I have received all the documentation from La Plata, and I'm going to present it and request that the matter be reconsidered."

"When this is published, the brave men of the navy are going to respond to it by discrediting you on the basis of that conviction. You know that?"

"Yes. That's one of the reasons I hesitated to talk. But between one thing and another, I feel better talking."

He covered the microphone with his hand. It was harder for him to talk about the fraud than about the flights. He preferred to go on talking about ESMA.

"Was there another method of eliminating the prisoners?"

"They say that the athletic field is filled with the bodies of guerrillas, and that's wrong. It may be that the corpse of some wounded person who couldn't take it and died was cremated there."

"In what way?"

"They burned it. That's another topic that made the rounds. I had problems about that with the civilian personnel under me. They realized something strange was going on, because the Dorado people would ask for old tires in order to cremate the body. That was another way. But there were very few of them."

"How many?"

"Very few."

"In other words, they were taken up in airplanes when they were capable of walking."

"They were always capable of walking. Those who were wounded were treated."

"But in the cases you mention, the wounded could not. . ."

"Not wounded, no, dead. They arrived wounded. They were arrested and resisted arrest and sometimes they didn't survive, like anyone wounded in a war."

"Was there some special place for this?"

"No, no. Behind. But these were very rare cases."

"Did they have some special installation?"

"No, there was never anything out of the ordinary. What's more, the athletic field was always in use. It was never shut down."

"They burned a body and then played soccer on the athletic field?"

"Nooooo. That athletic field is very big. It's on land reclaimed from the river. The farthest part is practically inaccessible, it's not in use. It's behind everything, next to the river."

The tape has run out. But he doesn't get up. He asks me to put in another cassette. There is still something he wants to say.

Chapter Four

Shadowlands

HE HAD by now made several brief forays toward them, yet without fully revealing his worst memories. But he had come close enough and did not want to pull back, as if confession would be a kind of grim relief. He brought up the question spontaneously, as we were speaking of something else.

"You asked me what happened in the airplanes. Once the plane had taken off, the doctor on board gave them a second dose of an extremely powerful tranquilizer. It put them into a deep sleep."

"When the prisoners went to sleep, what did you do?"

"This is very sick."

"What's sick is what you people did."

"I would not want anyone to think it gives me pleasure to talk about this."

"You've already made it clear that you want to talk about Rolón and Astiz. I'm asking you about the details of the flight, so it won't remain an abstraction."

"There are four things that give me a very bad time. The two flights I did, the person I saw tortured, and the memory of the chains and shackles that were put on the prisoners. I barely saw them a couple of times, but I cannot forget that sound. I don't want to talk about it. Let me go."

"This is not ESMA. You're here of your own free will and you can go whenever you want to."

"Yes, I know. I didn't mean to say that. There are details that are important, but it's hard for me to tell you about them. I think about them and they make me crazy. In their unconscious state, the prisoners were stripped, and when the commander of the airplane gave the order, which happened according to where the plane was, the hatch was opened and they were thrown out, naked, one by one. That's the story. A gruesome story, but true, and no one can deny it. I can't get rid of the image of the naked bodies lined up in the plane's aisle, like something in a movie about Nazis. It was done from Skyvan planes belonging to the coast guard and Electras belonging to the navy. In the Skyvan, it was through the rear hatch, which slides down to open. It's a big door, but it has no intermediate positions. It's closed or it's open, so it was kept in the open position. The noncommissioned officer kept his foot on the door, so that there would be about 40 centimeters opening onto empty space. Then we started to lower the subversives through there. I was pretty nervous about the situation I was experiencing and I almost fell out into empty space.

"How?"

"I slipped and they caught me."

"You mentioned two flights in the same month."

"Yes, in June or July of 1977. The second flight was on a Saturday. My family was living in Bahía Blanca and I went there every two weeks, so I worked on Saturday and Sunday. I was at the school. They gave me the order. They put me in command of the convoy and we went through the same steps. This time it was

an Electra. The procedure was the same, but through the emergency door in the stern, on the starboard side—I mean on the right. This door was removed, and the operative who was to carry out the task was secured with a rope. On this second flight, in keeping with the way the navy saw things then, there were also special guests.”

“*What does that mean, ‘special guests?’*”

“Upper echelon navy officers who didn’t participate because they were only on the flight to back us up. For example, captains, high-ranking officers who were posted elsewhere.”

“*And what did they do?*”

“Nothing. It was a way of lending their moral support to the task we were doing.”

“*Were they seated next to the prisoners?*”

“No, no. There were hardly any seats. There was a small group of seats toward the front and the rest was empty.”

“*And where were the high-ranking officers?*”

“They were seated and then, during the operation, they stood up and watched.”

“*They were watching.*”

“Yes, yes. They were watching.”

“*But they did not participate.*”

“Well, to say they weren’t participating...”

“*Obviously they were participating and that was the meaning of their presence.*”

“Of course.”

“*Why didn’t they get involved actively, with their own hands?*”

“Because it wasn’t necessary.”

“*How were the unconscious people taken to the door?*”

“Between two men.”

“*They were dragged?*”

“They were carried to the door.”

“*They remained unconscious.*”

“Totally unconscious. No one suffered in the least.”

“*There was never any exception to that?*”

This question seems to disturb him more than the others. He thinks and thinks again before answering.

“No, none I can attest to.”

“*You never saw anyone wake up?*”

“Anyone. . . ?”

“*Wake up.*”

“No, I never saw that.”

“*Anyone resisting?*”

“No, no, no.”

“*And why did you slip?*”

“I slipped because the floor of the plane is made of metal and I almost went down, I was working hard pushing the bodies of subversives.”

“*Was any study made to determine in what place—*”

“I’m sure there must have been some studies. I imagine there were. Out on the open ocean.”

“*How many people do you calculate were killed in this way?*”

“Between fifteen and twenty per Wednesday.”

“*For how long?*”

“Two years.”

“*Two years, a hundred Wednesdays, from fifteen hundred to two thousand people.*”

“Yes. As we left the airport, a flight plan was filed for the Punta Indio base. When we reached Punta Indio, the plane veered out to sea. Someone said that the flight plans from that period had disappeared, something else that seems barbaric to me. At that time it may have been, but now, I don’t know.”

“*What navy personnel went along on every flight?*”

“The plane’s normal crew was in the cockpit.”

“*And with the prisoners?*”

“Two officers, one noncommissioned officer, a petty officer, and the doctor. On my first flight, the petty officer, who was from

the coast guard, was completely unaware of what the mission was. When he realized on board what he had to do, he had a nervous breakdown. He started weeping. He didn't understand anything, his words were all jumbled up. It started making me nervous, too. I started to explain to him, and I told the noncommissioned officer to speak to the pilots, because it was becoming quite a situation by then. . . I didn't know how to handle a coast guard man in such a critical situation. In the end, they sent him to the cockpit. The Skyvan is a big box, with a separate cockpit. We finished undressing the subversives—"

"You, Lieutenant Vaca, the doctor—"

"No, no. The doctor gave them the second injection, nothing more. Then he went to the cockpit. That happened on the second flight too."

"Why?"

"They said it was because of the Hippocratic oath. I think it was that way on all the flights. They said that was the reason, and in some way it was reasonably well accepted. Let's be concrete. The commander of one of those planes flew the plane. The pilot and copilot were flying the plane. Let's use your terms. They didn't kidnap, they didn't torture, they didn't kill?"

"How can you say they didn't?"

"According to you, the guilty one is only the one who's there, inside the problem, the one who is torturing. What's the difference between the plane's pilot and Rolón and Pernías?"

"There's no difference."

"Ahhhh. So, none of them or all of them, within the navy's standard screening procedures, but once they've passed through those screening procedures, none of them or all of them. Do you agree with me or not? Maybe you'll tell me 'None of them.' But it's got to be none or all."

"All those who participated. The one who was piloting the plane in which those people were killed was participating. The cook was not participating."

"The cook is a bad example."

"You're the one who used it."

"No, not the cook, because we're talking about the leaders and the officers on active duty at that time."

"What you're telling me is that they either participated in kidnapping, or they participated in torture, or they participated in clandestine executions. There wasn't anyone who didn't participate in any of those three things?"

"Perhaps, by chance, someone did not participate. Everyone was rotated. Someone might appear who could say, 'I wasn't there.' But he knew about it, and if he didn't participate it wasn't because he didn't want to, but because he wasn't assigned to. Make no mistake about that."

"What you're suggesting is that the burden of proof would have to be inverted; starting from the basis that everyone participated, and then analyzing in each specific case who can demonstrate that he did not?"

"If someone wants to justify himself, let him justify himself. It could be. It's an analysis you made, but we'd have to see if anyone wants to justify himself. It may be that someone might appear who would want to."

"If that were the political decision, a whole lot of men would appear and try to justify themselves."

"That could be the solution. It could be. But as things stand, it's unfair."

"To whom?"

"It's unfair that those who were truly active participants have already been approved by the Senate Confirmation Committee. What is the difference between Admiral Arduino who gave me the order and Captain Rolón? And Arduino ended up as chief of naval operations, under a constitutional government, after passing before the Senate Confirmation Committee. We must not be hypocritical. We must tell the truth. This is history. And on the basis of the truth, let decisions be made. You ask me what I

would do. I wouldn't do anything. First of all, I'm not on active duty, and second, I'm not a politician. What I say is, gentlemen, enough. Let's tell the truth, and on the basis of the truth, let them decide what they have to decide. But it's a lie to go on playing hide and seek and suddenly someone appears who isn't promoted because they say he was a torturer. He isn't promoted because the truth is not being told. Who are they protecting by not telling the truth?"

"You say you don't want to participate in a cover-up. A cover-up of what?"

"Of hiding something, of withholding information—and not only from the confirmation committee. They are withholding information about the disappeared from society."

"If everyone participated, they aren't all part of a cover-up. They are all participants in a crime. They are guilty of homicides, not cover-ups."

"Who is it who's covering something up?"

"You say that they are engaged in a cover-up."

"Who is it who should have given out the information? Or do you think it is normal for a commander to go and try to defend himself before the Senate Confirmation Committee by saying what the method was? It had a tremendous impact. You saw the headlines in all the newspapers. They went to defend themselves in a matter they know at heart is an injustice. And what did they say? Did the two officers who went to talk with the confirmation committee lie or did they tell the truth?"

"They told part of the truth."

"They weren't asked for all of it. Are they the ones who have to tell it?"

"If they had been asked about the clandestine executions they would have talked about them?"

"I don't know. They weren't asked. But do things have to come to that point or does the truth have to be told once and for all? Don't you think it's time for this to be brought to light,

finally and clearly? My information is minimal. Or do you think that if I had the names of the disappeared I would have kept them to myself. But I don't have them."

"When you made those transports, did you know who those people were?"

"I had no idea."

"You didn't meet them beforehand? You hadn't seen them at ESMA?"

"No, no. Nor did it interest me. I was placing total faith in the decisions my superiors had made."

"But, in the line of duty, you didn't come into contact . . . ?"

"No, no, I only had occasional contact with the prisoners."

"What kind of contact?"

"Not talking to them. Just seeing them, and the rest. There was no direct interaction. A rumor had it that the ex-navy man Jorge Devoto was thrown out while conscious, but I never knew if it was true."

"You didn't know who the prisoners were?"

"No, but neither did I try to find out. I never had a single doubt about what was being done there. If you want me to tell you—look, I don't . . . I would be lying to you completely."

"I don't want you to tell me that."

"I didn't have the least doubt about what was taking place in a totally legal way, as was fitting. I was twenty-eight years old and had spent ten years in the navy. It's neither a lot nor a little. I was a lieutenant and was sufficiently trained and had enough seniority not to have doubts about my superiors. I was totally absorbed in my career."

"The issue is not doubting your superiors. But, in the education that you men were given . . ."

"That didn't exist. What did exist was killing the enemy."

"How is the enemy to be killed?"

"In war. That was a dirty war, for which we were unprepared."

"Is it true that you were unprepared or is that an excuse?"

"We were not prepared for that."

"From 1958 on, the naval intelligence service was working on the hypothesis, giving courses, publishing articles, pamphlets, books, giving people special training . . ."

"Whatever you like, but that has nothing to do with the real preparation of the men of the navy for the fight against subversion. Or do you think that they were giving courses on how to fight in the street? After it began, when the combat began, but before that no. If Rolón were a marine infantryman — but he's a naval officer."

"Pernías?"

"Pernías is an infantryman. There were airmen, too. Is any airman prepared to fight against subversion in the street?"

"Perhaps certain branches were not, but the navy as an institution was preparing for it for twenty years."

"Ideological preparation is one thing, but what does it have to do with anything? What there was were attempts to counteract the ideological penetration of the Left. If you ask me what was being done about that at the highest levels of the navy, I don't know. Ah, you are saying that as a result of that, we were convinced."

"Prepared. I have the testimony of an officer who was instructed on how to torture."

"In the navy?"

"Yes. An officer at ESMA. During an antisubversive exercise, they tortured each other. The army's officers did the same thing."

"I never heard that. Maybe the marine infantry."

"It seems to me that it's the reverse of what you think. They had been prepared for what they did. That's why no one had any doubts."

Every time an idea surprises him, he remains silent. He resists accepting a different perspective, but he isn't categorical either. "That's your analysis, that's what you say, it may be, perhaps you are right," he says as he resumes the dialogue each time, with a flexibility that seems strange in such an institutionalized personality.

"That's an analysis you can make. I don't know. If the order had been to go out and kill Chileans or subversives, it would have been accepted in the same way. Superior orders are not open to discussion. If you start having doubts . . . I can have doubts about my superiors once they don't answer letters that are clearly written. Why don't they answer me? You're convinced that the navy acted as a gang, and I don't want to be convinced. But facts like those make me wonder. Admiral Ferrer doesn't answer me, Admiral Molina Pico doesn't answer me. The silence continues. I don't know. I even tried to get a feel for what is going on inside the navy, and no one knows what happened. I don't want to be a hypocrite and say, 'I'm the good guy now because I'm talking about this.' No. Because tomorrow they're going to say, 'Scilingo, the repentant one.' And that's not how it is. Scilingo, under the same circumstances, would have done exactly the same thing. But everything has been changing, and instead of being recounted as a triumph, I'm telling you about it in a situation I can't even describe, thanks to my superiors . . . And fundamentally thanks to me, also. Because I believed absolutely in everything I was doing and carried out all the orders with complete conviction. That's the dirty war we won."

Dusk has invaded the room. Time has stopped. When the light is switched on, Scilingo looks at his watch. He's grown taciturn. It's hard for him to go back to the shadowland of his memory. He says good-bye without arranging for another meeting.

Chapter Five

Just Like Reality

SCILINGO'S VOICE is still there on the tape, the documents still bear his signature. At his house, they answer the telephone and pass it over to him, and the same voice that is on the tape comes across the wire. This has happened; it's not a dream. But is it going to vanish like a dream?

When a secret kept for almost twenty years became unbearable, he told his ghastly stories to someone who only by chance was not his victim. He answered all the questions, he submitted to a role he had not imagined playing. How would he react after letting it all out, when he began to measure the step he had taken and its consequences? Would he go back to take refuge in the old institutional certainties, cut off all contact, try to prevent publication?

Not at all. Ten days later he was prepared to go on talking.

"When you decide to publish this, please give me at least twenty-four hours' notice. I know I'm putting myself in the middle of a very big mess, and I have to take certain precautions."

"Because of the navy?"

"No. Videla's group. They're the only ones who are still organized. They're a group of Catholic fanatics."

Nevertheless, he seemed calm.

"Though you might not believe it, talking has been good for me. I felt better. But you're very close-mouthed. You don't tell me what you think."

"You said that in addition to your wife you had spoken with two civilian friends about this. When?"

"Six years afterward."

"Why did you tell them about it?"

"Out of the same need that's making me talk to you about it now. At that point I wanted to know what someone who was outside of what I experienced would think of it. In some way, I think they knew about it, the way a lot of people know about it, but it's never spoken of. The subject is still taboo. I think the time has come to speak the truth. There are moments like this in each person's life. I don't know how the others are going to react or if many of them are going to be in agreement with my coming forward to describe this."

"How did your friends react?"

"In silence. They understood what I had done. It wasn't a conversation to ask for forgiveness or offer explanations. I also talked to my mother before she died.

"How did those conversations go?"

"She asked questions. I think she related it to the subject of my retirement. I never explained it to her directly, but she suspected. So she tried to find out what the problem was and to give me some support as a mother. I got aggressive with her, because I didn't want to discuss the subject. At certain stressful moments, the flights come back to my mind automatically. I've had periods when I had to take sleeping pills, periods when I drank too much. I don't think it has affected the navy, but it certainly has affected my family. It affected me profoundly. The navy cannot accept that I have this kind of problem."

"Do your children know?"

"My wife told them about it gradually. And recently I spoke with them. My fifteen-year-old daughter has a civics professor who addressed the subject. Well, in a balanced way the teacher said that the subversives were setting off bombs and that the armed forces also committed barbaric acts to stop them. In order to talk to my daughter about it, I looked for some things I have in my library. I consulted the pamphlet the armed forces published on the war against subversion and it made me ashamed. There were very few abductions of members of the military, you were right. I also showed her the magazine in which (former guerrilla chief Mario) Firmenich tells how they killed (ex-military dictator Pedro Eugenio) Aramburu (in 1970). My daughter knows everything that happened—she isn't forgetting about the bombs or anything. But when she has to tally it all up, she tells me that the armed forces did worse things. When you talk about a gang I don't agree, but with that word you leave me on a dead-end street, because a moment comes when I can't find any explanation for it. I don't know if the navy acted as a gang or as an armed force. Or if we acted in the belief that we were an armed force and in fact we were acting as a gang. And the current silence in some way justifies your position. Up until the moment of the pardons, I felt that I had carried out orders and that the sentence passed on my commanding officers was political. But all of that collapsed on me when they agreed to go quietly back to their homes and Videla started talking nonsense. It affected me tremendously. I realized that something was not right. What I had done, was it right or was it wrong?"

"Up until that moment, you had never questioned yourself?"

"It's not that I hadn't questioned myself as a human being. I hadn't questioned militarily."

"What's the difference?"

"As a human being, face to face with the enemy, when you kill you have to question it. I told you that I came back from the first flight feeling bad. Bad. I did not feel good, but I did not doubt that

militarily I had carried out an order I was completely convinced about. But what happens when you discover that your commanding officers go quietly home and accept—'O.K., that's fine, they sentenced me, now they are pardoning me?' Does that mean the sentence was justified? If they had rejected the pardon, I would have thought, militarily, the political game goes on, but those men are conducting themselves fittingly. But to go home as they did, that I do not accept. Not only do I not accept it, but every time I think about it, I feel bad because it makes me question everything I did at the Navy School of Mechanics. Maybe if the former commanders in chief were still prisoners because they had not accepted the pardon, you would still see it the way you do now. I wouldn't.

"The only person who didn't accept the pardon was Graciela Daleo, a former prisoner at ESMA."

"You see. Mistaken or not, she had her convictions and still has them. And Videla, does he have any convictions about what he did, or did he just go home? They solved their personal problem and forgot about all the men who carried out their orders."

"Have you decided to talk about the tortures you witnessed?"

"One day I was in the officer's lounge at the school, near the bar, and in came the so-called Lieutenant Vaca and told me he had had a woman lawyer arrested in an investigation he had carried out personally. He told me they were interrogating her at that very moment, if I wanted to go. I went because I wanted to see what kind of investigation Lieutenant Vaca could have carried out; I had serious doubts about him. She was being interrogated with the methods that, as was said in Congress, were the methods that were used . . . In other words, she was being tortured with an electric cattle prod. I was there a very short time, first of all because . . . I don't know if I'm not . . . a little soft for that kind of thing . . . It was a woman. From what I heard from the people who were interrogating her, she had absolutely nothing to do with anything. I left. I asked about it a while later and she had disappeared.

"She had disappeared. What does that mean?"

"That she had disappeared. So then . . ."

"That they had made her disappear."

"They had . . . she had disappeared, yes. And I asked Vaca, 'but if she had nothing to do with anything . . .?' No, no, he says, it was determined later that she had been involved in some very serious things. I always had my doubts. I don't know any more about it. But I always had my doubts. It's hard for me to tell you about it. It's real, it's like that, that's how it is. But in our discussions, when you talk about a gang and I deny it totally, these are the facts that make me wonder if there weren't gang attitudes."

"Well, to begin with, there was the commander in chief who went out boating with his mistress's husband one afternoon and came back alone."

"What do you mean, came back alone?"

"He threw him into the ocean."

"Ahhh, in the . . ."

"It was the businessman, Fernando Branca, his mistress's husband."

Scilingo doesn't answer. Like the subjects of the lack of control over the money from the auto shop or his conviction for fraud, the reference to the reason Massera was arrested during the dictatorship—by a judge appointed by the military government—seems to disturb him more than the memory of the flights.

"That kind of man was the commander in chief of the navy."

"You know, I had blind faith in Admiral . . . in then-admiral Massera. It was more than that, I had total and absolute admiration for Admiral Massera. The year after I was at the Navy School of Mechanics, I was reassigned to the frigate *Libertad*, there was a dinner before weighing anchor, and by chance I was seated next to Admiral Massera. You cannot imagine how proud I was. That's how it is. After having been an admiral, he accepted a pardon, he left in silence, and he forgot all of us who were beneath him. So, OK. What can you do?"

"You underwent psychiatric treatment?"

"I went several times to the psychologist at the naval hospital, who gave me a sedative. But the psychologist was a civilian and he didn't want to get involved in the issue either. Afterward he tried to steer me into therapy on the couch with a very young woman who was there. Then I said, this isn't doing any good, and I stopped going."

"Did you read the report entitled *Nunca Más*, written by the National Commission on the Disappeared?"

"I didn't read it impartially. I saw it as the biased publication of an enemy. Maybe I should reread it now."

"It speaks of exactly the same thing you lived through."

"I always believed that the trial of the former military leaders was political. Because I was convinced of everything that was done. At that time I thought that (the head of the commission, the writer Ernesto) Sábato was a subversive, and now I realize that was ridiculous. Sábato!"

"And what do you think of *Nunca Más* and the trial now?"

"They both seem unimportant compared with the fact of having carried out the orders of people who have deceived me."

"So you are still just as arrogant. The only important thing would be for your leaders to assume their responsibility. The bravery of the survivors who narrated what took place, of the members of the commission and the judges who reconstructed the truth . . ."

"What bravery? We were under a democratic government."

"The armed forces were still threatening, resisting the trials."

"The armed forces were not threatening. The proof is that the trial took place."

"Everything civilians do seems trivial to you, it doesn't matter to you."

"Does it seem like a small thing to you that the military leaders do not assume responsibility for what we did?"

"It seems like a big thing. Furthermore, it isn't only the lead-

ers. No one on any level assumed any kind of responsibility. But I don't understand why everything apart from that seems unimportant to you."

"To retell what happened is unimportant, because it's real. The conviction of the military leaders was based on concrete facts."

"Then why did you think it was political?"

"Because at that time I was convinced."

"The subject of the flights is addressed on page 235 of (the Argentine edition of) Nunca Más and it appeared in the testimony given during the trials. What did you feel when you learned about that?"

"That it was a narration of the facts given by people whose ideas I did not share. It's real, just like reality. What seems aberrant to me is that my superiors don't say it. I'm still shocked by that attitude. I see the other side of it as minor."

There isn't much left to say. He's anxious and euphoric. But he has one doubt: "When you write about this, are you going to destroy me?" he asks.

"I'm going to express my opinion as little as possible."

Part II *Denial*

Chapter Six

The Institutional Lie

THE SILENCE that Pernías and Rolón began to breach in the Senate had been constructed very deliberately. But Scilingo's confession finally broke through to the heart of the matter after almost two decades. It seems worthwhile to go back over the itinerary—from the initial phase of complete denial to the subsequent period of partial admissions and euphemisms—that led from the institutional lie to the truth of a lone man to whom no one wanted to listen.

Not long after the 1976 military coup, Admiral Massera, the commander in chief of the navy, had defined the lines of battle: "Those who are on the side of death and we who are on the side of life." He began by saying, "We will not have death roaming freely through Argentina," and ended with this warning: "We are not going to fight to the death; we are going to fight to victory, whether it lies before or beyond death." In between, he described the military's battle with political "subversives" as an oblique,

primitive and cruel war in which "a machine of horror was unleashing its impunity on innocent and unprepared people."

In 1977, at which time more than half of the military regime's kidnappings and homicides had already taken place, President Videla spoke for the first time about the disappeared, whose existence until then had been denied and ascribed to propaganda disseminated by the country's perverse and powerful enemies. In a dialogue with foreign journalists, he described four types of *desaparecidos*: those who were living underground, traitors who had been eliminated by the guerrillas themselves, those whose bodies were left unrecognizable by fires and explosions during confrontations between the two sides, and, finally, those who had endured "excesses" committed by the military repression. He refrained from stating how many people might belong in each category and refused to discuss any specific cases.

A few days later, the chief of staff of the army, General Roberto Viola, explained in the guildhall of the country's major landowners and cattle breeders that about seven or eight thousand subversives had been arrested or killed in combat, an astonishingly imprecise figure, considering that the life or death of thousands of people was concerned. Viola was playing with numbers, Massera with words. Each one in his own way was mocking his interlocutors. One journalist said to Massera: "Information has reached us from abroad that human rights are probably not being sufficiently respected in Argentina, and it has even been said that there are people who have been unjustly deprived of their freedom or even of their lives."

"What doubt can there be that human rights are not respected in Argentina, that people are unjustly deprived of liberty and murders are committed? Otherwise, what is the meaning of the lengthy, the immense list of members of the armed forces, business people, community leaders, and people completely outside of politics, women and children, killed without pity or kept for months in so-called people's jails under conditions that would be

insulting to the most despicable animal?" Massera responded. His questioner did not even think of asking him which animals he most despised.

According to Viola, losing the war was worse than dying. The only explanation the army gave the country would be to say that it had fulfilled its mission. In an insidious phrase, he referred to the losses, the deaths, the wounded, the prisoners, and what he called "those who were absent forever." So that no one would press the issue, he repeated that explanations should not be sought because none would be given.

In 1979, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States (OAS) visited jails and interviewed politicians, members of the military, labor union leaders, businessmen, members of the media, and the families of disappeared people, gathering evidence and testimony. During the same period, General Albano Harguindeguy, then minister of the interior, boasted with an arrogance that was in its final days that Argentina confesses its sins only before God, and triumphant armies are not put on trial or asked to account for their actions after the war.

When Viola left the ranks of the army in preparation for his presidential candidacy, he said that there was one fundamental condition for the transition to democracy: the armed forces would never agree to a review of their actions, because to allow those who fought with honor and sacrifice to be placed on trial would amount to a betrayal and an insult under their code of ethics. During a visit to the United States to meet president-elect Ronald Reagan, Viola stated his conviction that military victory exempted the victor from all responsibility, and went on to say that if Germany had won World War II, the Nuremberg trials would have taken place in Virginia, thus unwittingly placing the Argentine dictatorship on an equal footing with the Nazis.

The man who replaced Viola in the army, General Leopoldo Galtieri, maintained that the military had preserved the integrity

of the nation, which justified the means that had been employed. "Don't ask us for explanations, because we will not give them, just as our enemies would not have given any if they had won the war," he thundered. President Videla declared that the participation of the country's political parties in the dialogue convened by the government constituted a formal legitimization of the military's assault on power and that the participants in the dialogue had committed themselves to communicating to the public their approval of everything done during the fight against subversion.

By now, the military leaders were no longer denying the accusations or resorting to unlikely explanations of the disappearances. They were justifying them and making an acknowledgment of that justification a *sine qua non* for the politicians who aspired to sit down at their magnanimous table. But they were still talking about the disappearances in shameful euphemisms.

The OAS report, which came out in 1980, stated that the thousands of disappeared persons had been killed by official forces. The report also considered the appalling, systematic use of torture to be irrefutable. In the official response to that report, the military's new position crystallized. The government claimed that the risk of a national collapse had created an urgent situation in which the state had exercised its powers of self-defense and had resorted to "the appropriate means." Not to have done so would have doomed it to powerlessness and would have been a form of suicide. But the government continued to keep silent about the nature of the methods employed, a subject that remained absolutely taboo.

This problem, which the four first military juntas had underestimated at the apogee of their power, remained pressing in a way no military man would have suspected was possible after the junta lost the war with Great Britain for the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands and subsequently collapsed. The last dictator, General Benito Bignone, was responsible for organizing the withdrawal of the military from power. Before taking office, in 1982,

he met with representatives of all the political parties, and only Francisco Manrique, a conservative and former naval captain, dared to suggest that it would be appropriate to publish the list of the disappeared. Bignone said that there was no such list, and no one pressed him any further.

Terrified by the possible social consequences of the regime's dissolution, the Catholic Church proposed holding a mass for reconciliation, so that the political parties could agree with the military government on the conditions of succession and negotiate an amnesty. Factions within the military vetoed an exchange of impunity for a favorable electoral timetable. But once the military had established that elections would take place within a time period that would allow the political parties to recondition their rusty machinery, the opposition politicians did not display any interest in agreeing on anything with a regime that was coming apart at the seams.

In the absence of a negotiated agreement, the military government unilaterally published a set of conditions, which principally demanded that the dirty war and the dirty business conducted by the military not be reviewed, that the judges permanently appointed by the dictatorship not be dismissed, and that the armed forces' participation in the next government be guaranteed.

In September 1983, the military Holy Trinity, made up of the chiefs of staff of the three armed forces, signed its "Final Document of the Military Junta on the War against Subversion and Terrorism." The document maintained that the cellular organization and compartmentalization of the enemy required unusual procedures such as those used during the dirty war. Since the military forces were acting on estimations that had to be made in the midst of the fight, with the degree of passion generated by combat and the defense of one's own life, "within that almost apocalyptic context, mistakes were made that, as happens in all wartime conflict, could cross the limits of respect for

fundamental rights." Such errors should remain subject to the judgment of God and the compassion of mankind. They were committed while operating institutionally and within the natural chain of command in fulfillment of orders that arose from the essence of the military's task, it said.

On the subject of the disappeared, the junta accepted as a simple hypothesis that they may have died violently during battles with legal forces and that they were buried without having been identified.

Another document, solemnly entitled "Institutional Declaration," repeated that all operations were executed in accordance with plans that were approved and supervised by the high command. There are, the declaration explained, numerous disappearances even in a classic war, when the contenders are of different nationalities, uniforms are worn that differentiate between the two sides, and they are separated by perfectly identifiable lines. In a war as peculiar as Argentina's, in which the enemy did not wear a uniform and his identity papers were forged, the number of unidentified dead increases significantly.

This intentional inversion of the terms (the families were demanding information on the fate of identified people who had been taken alive, and the junta was answering them with unidentified dead bodies) introduced the report's central paragraph. In that paragraph, the junta denied the existence of secret detention centers and declared that the disappeared who were not living in exile or in hiding were dead, "even though up until now the cause and occasion of their death cannot be specified nor the location of their graves." As was customary in the military prose of that period, the report expressed the wish that the enemy dead would receive God's forgiveness.

The document did not reveal precisely what happened between the time of arrest of living persons—who had first names and family names, which the military forced them to reveal under torture—and their transformation into the anony-

mous dead whose corpses were floating in limbo. Eighty percent of the disappeared had been kidnapped in front of witnesses from their homes, from the street, or from their workplaces. It was a war without battles.

The document concluded by stating that only the judgment of history could determine with any exactitude who was responsible for unjust methods or innocent deaths, that the armed forces felt true Christian pain and recognized the "mistakes that may have been made" in fulfillment of their assigned mission. Here once again was the idea of a noble mission carried out, in which, at most, hypothetical mistakes of an unspecified nature could be conceded, subject to no review other than that of heaven or history.

With the presidential elections of 1983 one month away, the last military government signed the law of autoamnesty. Its initial clauses affirmed that the terrorism of the subversives had dictated the cruel and cunning form of the battle, which may have given rise over the course of the struggle to actions incompatible with the goals of the armed forces, which were fighting on the side of human dignity.

The pardon extended to all members of the military and their civilian collaborators who, still in hypothetical terms, "may have resorted to the use of procedures that went beyond the legal framework," not of their own will, naturally, but because of the aforementioned "imposition of unusual and extreme conditions under which those actions took place."

At that point, Scilingo was an aide to the chief of the Military House of the Presidency, Rear Admiral Ramón Arosa, who would become chief of staff of the navy under Alfonsín. "I think the list of the disappeared must be made public," Scilingo put to him in the days when the junta was publishing its "Final Document."

Arosa neither agreed nor disagreed.

The armed forces fled from the government on December 10, 1983, without ever having admitted to the aberrant acts that were committed under the orders of their leaders.

Chapter Seven

Boomerang

FROM THE first days of the dirty war, information about the fate of the disappeared prisoners began to flow, despite the strict censorship of the press and the military secrecy of the operations. With a little imprecision, information was even available about the flights, which Scilingo would describe in detail much later on.

On August 20, 1976, a cable from the Agency for Clandestine News (known as ANCLA, an acronym that, in Spanish, has the ironic naval meaning of "anchor"), created by the writer, journalist, and Montonero activist Rodolfo J. Walsh, stated that the government would never make the list of the prisoners known because "many of those listed had appeared as dead in combat on dates long after they were arrested." It cited the case of the Navy School of Mechanics, "where 160 prisoners appear on the books, out of whom only forty-five are actually being held there. None of the remaining prisoners has been sent to another prison,

so it is believed that they have been eliminated and thrown into the Río de la Plata."

Shortly afterward, I wrote an extensive work on the Navy School of Mechanics entitled *History of the Dirty War in Argentina*, which ANCLA distributed both in and outside the country. It was the first systematic compilation of the diverse facts known about that clandestine concentration camp. It began:

September 6, 1976, marked the forty-sixth anniversary of the first twentieth-century military coup in Argentina. On that day, the handcuffed and mutilated corpses of three young men washed up from the Río de la Plata onto the Uruguayan coast.

That macabre spectacle has been repeated dozens of times since March 24, 1976, when the Argentine military took over the government once more and a military junta gave control to Army General Jorge Rafael Videla, the eleventh man to have moved from the barracks to the Pink House in Buenos Aires in the last half-century.

In November 1975, while still promising President María Estela Martínez (better known as Isabelita Perón) that he would obey the law, Videla participated in the XI Conference of American Armies, which took place on the initiative of the United States Pentagon. There he declared that, "In Argentina, there shall be as many deaths as are necessary for peace to reign again." The Conference of American Armies was held in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, where the military has governed for half a decade under a civilian mask.

Four months later, when Videla discarded that tactic for Argentina and took over the presidency from Mrs. Perón, the echo of his words was felt in Uruguay.

The first body was found a few days after the installation of the new Argentine military government. It was disfigured and difficult to identify. Officially, Uruguay reported that from the features it could be a Japanese or a Korean, and the Argentine press imagined a fantastical Asiatic orgy on the high seas that ended in tragedy.

The hypothesis prospered with the discovery of two more bodies, but it did not check out very well against the evidence. No ship cast adrift, no report of missing persons arrived to support it.

The river continued depositing its mysterious cargo on Uruguay's Atlantic beaches, which, with their fine sand and warm climate, are frequented by tourists from throughout the Southern Cone. Some corpses had been slashed, others had limbs missing, most did not have nails on their fingers or toes.

Uruguayan exiles in Paris reported that among the dead were four of their comrades who had been arrested by the Uruguayan government. The Uruguayan military authorities immediately called a press conference in Montevideo and brought the four supposed victims out to meet the journalists.

The dead bodies were neither Koreans nor Japanese nor Uruguayans. The government in Buenos Aires behaved as if it had nothing to do with the matter. Its greatest concern at that time was to reconcile the various factions that comprised it.

Further on, the report described the procedures adopted by the leaders of the military coup:

Small task forces wearing civilian clothing and driving unmarked vehicles secretly ambush their enemies and transport them to military buildings without giving official notice of their arrest. The Fight Against Subversion Order of Operations, given by the army high command in November 1975, indicated that "special interrogational methods" were to be applied in order to carry out a prolonged intelligence action. In other words, torture was to be used in order to gain access to information so as to carry out further covert operations.

The chapter on ESMA said that its offensive structure "consisted of the so-called 3.3 Task Force" and described its special operations: "some in uniform, others in civilian clothing, in unmarked vehicles with the support of divisions 30 and 45 of the Federal Police." The uniformed patrols went out two or three times a day in green trucks preceded by a patrol car. "On the other hand, the patrols in civilian clothing were not regularly spaced and were carried out on the basis of pieces of intelligence that had been previously obtained. Conscripted soldiers did not participate in them and they were led by officers, noncommissioned officers, and petty officers." The report included the

model, color and license plate numbers of ten of the unmarked vehicles that were used in the kidnappings.

Under the subtitle "Cruel and Unusual Punishments," the testimony of a person imprisoned in the ESMA for three weeks appeared in the report:

When, with a hood over my head, I arrived at the place where I would be held, I heard the sound of airplanes. To reach the building where I was kept, we crossed a very large room where very loud rock music was heard. I recognized it days later when they took me there to torture me. From that large room we entered an elevator, and after leaving it I was taken up a flight of nine stairs. I was placed in a room with other people whom I did not know, about twenty or thirty of them. All of them had their feet tied down with chains attached to shackles around their ankles. Most of the chains were also attached to columns or to very heavy pieces of iron. I had a hood over my head and my hands cuffed behind my back for the entire three weeks I was there. They did not remove the hood even for meals, but they did switch the handcuffs to the front so I could feed myself with my hands. We were guarded by men who, from their age, did not appear to be conscripted soldiers. We could only see their ankle boots through the lower part of the hood. If we tried to speak among ourselves we were beaten. One day they took me to the large room with modern music and then to a smaller room inside it. They used the electric cattle prod on me there.

"The electric cattle prod," the report explained:

has a metal tip connected to two electrical poles which produce a charge upon contact with the skin. It is an Argentine invention. For a long time, rudimentary cattle prods were used in the stockyards to force the cattle in the direction desired by the horseman who was herding them to the corrals where they would be slaughtered. Similarly ingenious devices running on tiny batteries are still used today by jockeys who want to stimulate their mounts without running the risk of doping them, which leaves chemical traces.

In the 1930s, during Argentina's first twentieth-century military dictatorship, the police began to use the electric cattle

prod to force confessions from presumed criminals. The cattle prod is a useful instrument of torture for avoiding evidence and the penalties that can befall torturers under a liberal regime in which judges, lawmakers, and journalists are watching to insure that any excesses are not scandalous; if the prod has been skillfully wielded, no marks are left on the skin a few days later.

But in today's Argentina, marks on the skin, judges, lawmakers, and journalists have all ceased to worry the military, which does not feel obliged to give an account of its actions to anyone and even allows itself to divulge, in brief communications, that a prisoner has died from cardiac arrest, without giving further details. The memories of the few prisoners who have succeeded in leaving the Navy School of Mechanics alive, freed when their lack of connection with the causes for which they were arrested was proven—or, in one case, having escaped—allow an approximate reconstruction of the range of cruel and unusual punishments employed there: the rape of women, the introduction of live mice into their vaginas, the mutilation of genitals with razor blades, vivisection without anesthesia, the amputation of limbs, the pulling off of finger- and toenails. The torture concludes with the death of the prisoners, who are thrown into the Río de la Plata or, when possible, transported in a navy ship to the high seas. For that reason, one of the corpses found in Uruguay had Argentine cigarettes, matches, and coins in its pants pockets.

This report identified eighteen victims and more than thirty of their torturers, among them the army officers Adolfo M. Arduino, Jorge Acosta, and Antonio Pernías, whose last name appeared without the final *s*. It also reprinted an open letter written by the former vice minister of education, Emilio Fermín Mignone, whose daughter Mónica had been abducted along with two priests and several catechism teachers in May 1976. Despite the denial of the naval commanders, Mignone pointed with certainty at the Navy School of Mechanics:

Wasn't it denied, despite all the evidence, that the Jesuit priests Yorrio and Jalics—who have been held incommunicado for three months without being charged with any-

thing—had been arrested? And the same thing happened with the fifteen catechists who were released with hoods over their heads and in chains after twelve hours of hunger and cold. The forces that took action on Sunday, May 23, at noon, in Bajo Flores quarter, said they were from the army and asked for support from the local police headquarters. Admiral Montes, chief of naval operations, who denies that my daughter is being held prisoner by his branch of the military (a statement I permit myself to doubt entirely), told me that the procedure had been carried out by the marine infantry, and that the kidnapped persons were taken to the Navy School of Mechanics. But all that was denied for two months, until the information was leaked by an officer's wife.*

The report reprinted extensive passages of Mignone's letter, which addressed the most essential aspects of the matter with a precision rare for a contemporary and even more rare in one who was a victim of the actions he discusses:

Either those thousands of prisoners arrested by men of the armed forces on active duty are under your jurisdiction and in that case the military hierarchy is lying and putting on a huge farce when they receive us with smiles and kindness, or the officers who are acting in this way are not subordinate to your orders, in which case the situation is extremely grave.

I ask that you calculate the consequences and the historical responsibility of those who rose to power under the banner of a state monopoly on power and a few months later cannot control even a noncommissioned officer. The dilemma is enormous, and if you are lying it is equally enormous because a state cannot be based on lies. I have explained all of this without receiving a satisfactory response in every one of the bureaus of the armed forces which the disappearance of my poor, good daughter has forced me to enter.

*Mónica Mignone and her friend Mónica Quintero, who had until recently been a nun, had been abducted together. One of Mónica Quintero's first cousins was the wife of the concentration camp's chief of intelligence, Commander Jorge Acosta, and one of Quintero's sisters was married to the man who, eighteen years later, as Admiral Molina Pico, would become the chief of staff of the navy. It seems likely that the cousin or the sister was the source Mignone mentions.

Mignone stated his view that the military authorities were practicing a "dirty war without seeing that it is suicide, in addition to being immoral. How can they not be aware that two years from now, if they have killed the twenty or thirty thousand marginal figures that they have taken prisoner or that they hope to take prisoner, or even if they release them after months in hiding, chained, hooded, and tortured, the literature on the subject is going to inundate the country and will turn like an unstoppable boomerang against the armed forces themselves?"

The report continued, "Another high functionary of a former military government,"

Air Force General Jorge Landaburu, underwent the same agony as Mignone after the disappearance of one of Landaburu's daughters, who was twenty-three years old and a member of the Peronist University Youth.

When she was captured by a squad from the Navy School of Mechanics, the young woman was in possession of another female prisoner's narrative of the tortures that were used on her before she had managed to escape from the school a few days earlier. For 150 days, this general was negotiating at the highest political and military levels, but the navy denied they were holding his daughter. At the end of September, nevertheless, officers of the school gave him his daughter's body; after five months of torture, she had been shot.

It is difficult to estimate the number of victims, but it is known that between a basement that is very close to the runways of the Buenos Aires airport—almost all the narratives coincide in mentioning the intense noise of airplane engines—and an attic in the officers' building at the school, there are on a permanent basis about sixty prisoners, whose numbers are constantly being replenished. Some arrive, while others are thrown into the sea. About twenty-five corpses have already appeared in Uruguay, but out of all those who have been killed, this is believed to be only a small percentage, which because of technical errors slipped past the control of the authorities at the school and became known to the public.

In a special dispatch for the first anniversary of the military dictatorship, the ANCLA news agency distributed a cable on the

human rights situation. One of its paragraphs reviewed the appearance of corpses in the Atlantic Ocean: "During a social gathering at the Mau Mau night club, a minister in the nation's cabinet boasted that 'now things are really going well because we put all the subversives in body bags, take them out on boats, and throw them into the sea: it's what we should have been doing from the beginning.' Responsible sources indicate that those murdered in this way number in the hundreds."

On March 24, 1977, in his "Open Letter from a Writer to the Military Junta," praised by Gabriel García Márquez as a masterpiece of universal journalism, Rodolfo J. Walsh wrote,

Between fifteen hundred and three thousand people have been secretly massacred since you forbade the publication of information about the discovery of corpses, which in certain cases has come out nevertheless because it has affected other countries, because of its genocidal magnitude, or because of the fear provoked among your own forces. Twenty-five mutilated bodies washed up on the Uruguayan coast between March and October of 1976, a small part, perhaps, of the number of those tortured to death in the Navy School of Mechanics.

Walsh rejected "the fiction of right-wing gangs," supposedly descended from the '3-A' groups (death squads) of José López Rega, the former minister under Isabelita (Perón), and capable of crossing the largest garrison in the country in military trucks, carpeting the Río de la Plata with dead bodies or throwing prisoners into the sea from the aircraft of the first air brigade without either General Videla, Admiral Massera, or Brigadier General Agosti becoming aware of it. Today, the 3-A are the 3-Armed Forces, and the junta you men preside over is not the needle on the scale between 'two opposing violent factions' nor the just arbitrator between 'two terrorisms' but the very source of terror that has lost its way and can only stammer out the discourse of death.

The next day, Walsh was ambushed by a squad from ESMA at an appointment one of his comrades had revealed to them under torture. Astiz was supposed to deliver him alive to the torture chambers. Walsh ruined his plan by grabbing the tiny .22-caliber

Walther PPK pistol he was hiding. It was useless for breaking through the circle of fifteen gunbarrels, but very eloquently expressed his will not to let them touch him. Before falling, he wounded the leg of a policeman who was later decorated for having been lamed in the line of duty. Five prisoners knew about the preparations for the operation, and one of them saw Walsh's body, riddled with bullet holes, at the Navy School of Mechanics. He believes they set it on fire, as Scilingo describes, on the athletic field, next to the river that figured in Walsh's final story.

Chapter Eight

Disinfection

IN THE Senate, Pernías admitted that the navy had participated in the abduction, torture, and disappearance of the French nuns Alice Domon and Leonie Duquet, but denied having taken part in it personally. He said that in the first series of accusations brought in France in 1979 or 1980 "I was not implicated at all in the matter." Only years later, "I began to be incriminated, but in a vague way, in the issue of the nuns."

The testimony that the survivors Sara Solarz de Osatinsky, Ana María Martí, and María Alicia Milia de Pirles gave in a chamber of the French National Assembly on October 12, 1979, refutes Pernías's claim. The text of that testimony affirms that the officers who participated in the operation against the nuns were Lieutenants Junior Grade Alfredo Aztis (*sic*) and Alfredo González Menotti, Lieutenants Schelling and Antonio Pernía (*sic*), Lieutenant Junior Grade Radizzi (*sic*) and the coast guard man Favre. The inexact spelling of the names resulted from the

limited information available at that time. "They were savagely tortured. The conduct of both nuns was admirable. Even in the worst moments of pain, Sister Alice, who was in Capucha,* asked how her comrades were. Ironically, she asked in particular about the 'little blond boy' who was none other than the navy officer who had infiltrated the group, Lieutenant Junior Grade Astiz." The prisoners at ESMA heard the officers calling them the flying nuns. In 1979, a Spanish magazine reprinted part of the survivors' declaration, illustrated with photographs of Pernías and Rolón.

Even before that, in April 1978, the Argentine Commission for Human Rights, which gathered the testimony of survivors in exile, had published the narrative of Horacio Domingo Maggio, a trade unionist who escaped from ESMA. Maggio told of his dialogues with the nuns in the clandestine concentration camp. "They were not wearing their habits and were very battered and weak, because two guards had to take Sister Alice to the bathroom since she couldn't stand up." She told him that they had tied her to a bed, completely naked, and passed the electric cattle prod across her body. "They were at ESMA for approximately eleven days, on most of which they were interrogated and tortured. Then they were transferred along with eleven other people, I don't know where." In a magazine published by Uruguayan exiles in Sweden, Maggio identified Pernías among the torturers of the nuns. There are no doubts about the chronology here, because Maggio was killed a few months later.

One detail that continues to obsess the survivors was that Astiz kissed the ones who were to be abducted, in order to identify them to their captors, who were watching from a distance. The notice with the partial list of the disappeared was published in the newspapers on Christmas Day 1977, and among the

* Capucha (hood) and Capuchita (little hood) were the names of the two rooms at ESMA where the prisoners were held.

signatures appearing with it was that of Gustavo Niño, the name under which Astiz had pretended to be the brother of a disappeared man. During the trial of the former military leaders, the prosecution called as a witness the real Gustavo Niño, a thin, dark-skinned man who does not resemble the blond, rotund Astiz in the least.

Sara Solarz de Osatinsky, Ana María Martí, and María Alicia Milia de Pirles were set free by the 3.3 Task Force, which considered them "recuperated," to use the expression favored at ESMA. In their testimony, they also spoke of the method used to eliminate the prisoners, about which by then much more was known than during the first denunciations in 1976 and 1977. Their statement gives an idea of the feelings that the flights described by Scilingo aroused in the victims:

On Wednesdays, or sometimes on Thursdays, transports took place. At first they told us that the captives were being taken to other prisons or to the work camps they said they had near the Rawson penitentiary in Patagonia. It was hard for us to convince ourselves that in reality the transport took them to their deaths. The day of the transport the atmosphere was very tense. We captives didn't know if we were going to be chosen that day or not. The guards were much more severe. We couldn't go to the bathroom. Each one of us had to stay rigidly in his place, with the hood and shackles on, without making any movements that might enable us to see what was going on. All of this happened in Capucha and Capuchita. The basement was completely evacuated around 3:30 P.M. If any captive was being tortured there, they took him up to the third floor. At around 4:00 P.M., in Capucha, they began calling up prisoners by their case numbers. They were formed into a single file line, holding onto each other's shoulders, since they were still wearing hoods and shackles. They led them down one by one. We could hear the noise the shackles made as they walked toward the door, which was opened and then immediately closed again. Each one took with him only the clothing he was wearing.

They were taken to the infirmary in the basement, where the nurse would give them an injection to knock them out without killing them. In that state, still alive, they were taken

out the side door of the basement and put on a truck. Half-unconscious they were driven to the military airport, placed on board an airplane that flew south, out to sea, where they were thrown out alive. Often during the transport, helicopters could be heard flying over the area. For that reason we thought that sometimes the transports were carried out by that means. These statements are based on events we lived through during the two years spent in the officer's club at ESMA.

We never heard anything more about the thousands of prisoners who left on those collective transports. In a little room, the storeroom where the clothing the prisoners wore was kept, we often found the clothing our comrades had been wearing the day of the transport.

While preparations for the transport were being made, our regular guards didn't enter the basement either, but sometimes they had to, and when they came back to the third floor they were visibly upset. It was clear that they didn't fully understand what was going on. They said in an uncontrolled way that terrible things were happening in the basement, that the prisoners to be transported were dead or knocked out by an injection. During the transport operation only the nurse, two guards, the officer on duty, and his aide went into the basement. The nurse went there hours before the transport with a box full of bottles and syringes.

One of the guards who was nicknamed "Bolita" (a derogative term for Bolivian immigrants) was present during almost all the transports, even on the days he was supposed to have off. Another who was always present was the one we called "la Bruja" (the Witch). Once he was seen coming back after a transport in a navy truck with a green canvas canopy in back; he took from the truck a long metal box full of shackles, which he carried down to the basement. We received a little information about the transports from the officers, too. It escaped them in moments of weakness. The coast guard officer Gonzalo Sánchez, a.k.a. "Chispa" (Sparkle), said that the bodies were thrown into the sea in the south, in areas close to naval stations.

At first Captain Acosta forbade any reference to the subject of the transports. In moments of hysteria, he made statements such as: "Here any troublemaker gets a shot of penthonaval and goes up." The suffix *-naval* added to the name of a medicine is a common form of speech in the navy. The expression "goes up" means "gets killed." Acosta also confirmed that of

all the prisoners who passed through there, the only ones left alive would be those in the group that the navy would later liberate. All the others would die. According to him, the hand of God would be present in this selection.

At the end of February 1977, there was a case of a mistaken transport, when our companion Tincho came back to Capucha. Tincho was physically very strong and was active in the Peronist Montonero movement. He was arrested in January. He had been a noncommissioned artillery officer in the navy. At the end of February, the guards called him up for transport. They took him down to the infirmary in the basement, where he was told he was going to be taken to a place where the conditions were better, but that he would first receive a vaccination to protect him from becoming infected with anything. The nurse gave him an injection in the arm, which took some time to have any effect. After a few minutes, Tincho began to feel that his arms and legs were no longer responding and that he was moving them as if in slow motion. He felt very weak, but did not fall asleep. The other prisoners felt the same. Some of them vomited while they were seated on the benches along the hallway in the basement. In some transports, there were a few who passed out, and they were dragged outside.

Tincho was taken out by the basement door and put in a truck which took him to the military airport. They started to put him on board a Fokker airplane. From above, Bolita asked his name. When he answered that he was Tincho, Bolita said, "You just saved yourself, kid," and took him back to ESMA. He was put back in Capucha. Tincho slept all that night and the following day. He was taken away in an individual transport a few days later. Afterward we learned that in mid-1977 he was being held captive in a prison controlled by the army. We don't know what happened to him.

Another similar case occurred at the end of August 1977. On a day when there weren't usually transports, they cleared out the basement and took down three male prisoners who had been in Capuchita. That same night they brought them back up unconscious and covered in vomit. Bolita and several guards brought them. One of the guards was the one they called "el abuelo" (Grandpa). Two female prisoners who were coming out of the bathroom saw two of the prisoners thrown down onto a thick beige canvas that was in front of the doorway leading into Capuchita. The third one was being taken up by Bolita

and the guards, who were complaining because something had gone wrong with the transport. Two or three days later, those prisoners were taken away again and they never reappeared.

We weren't allowed to enter the basement until the day after the transport, even if it finished early. The next day the basement looked cleaner than usual, with the smell of disinfectant. Sometimes on the day of a transport we were told we had to clear out of the basement because it was going to be disinfected. Several times, they referred to the transport as "disinfection." Although the thorough cleaning was clearly intended to erase any possible evidence of what had happened the day before, there were many times when it was done quite negligently and we could see the marks of the bodies that were dragged from the infirmary to the side door of the basement. The most noticeable marks were the ones left by shoes or sneakers with rubber soles. In the hours following the transport, our anguish became even greater. On the one hand, we had another week of life ahead of us, but on the other hand we could see from the mattresses that were left empty which of our comrades had been taken away. And then we wept for them again, between pain, powerlessness, and rage. From what we were able to learn, ESMA was designated from the beginning as a place where prisoners were to be assembled, in other words where the prisoners were concentrated for subsequent transport.

The following organizational diagram was seen by a prisoner held by the navy:

Dump		
Dump	Center for concentration	Hospital
Dump	of prisoners	

From this diagram we were able to deduce that the final destination had been designated by the term "hospital."

The testimony of Lila Pastoriza, who was captured by the navy in 1977 and freed in 1978, coincides with this:

During the times when the repressive activity was at its height, the collective transports took place on a weekly basis, according to the guards and prisoners. The number of those transported varied each time: in some cases the transports included as many as forty or fifty prisoners. Individual transports could take place on any day at any hour. In general, the

guard on duty would summon the prisoners and take them away with him. There was neither the strictness nor the display of repression that was made during the mass transports.

The first transport I was present for took place on June 16 or 17, 1977. Since I was being held in the basement, I was led to Capucha completely blindfolded, and there I heard approximately fifty numbers called out, corresponding to the prisoners. Later I learned that it was one of the last transports to be so numerous.

During my time in Capuchita I believed—though without much conviction—the explanations for the transports that the members of the repressive groups gave out: the prisoners were taken to another place (to farms and detention centers in the south, they said) until the question of what to do with them was resolved, or in fulfillment of a sentence that supposedly had been given to them. The only indicator that supported that possibility was the knowledge that one or another transported prisoner had been seen (individually) in another place. About the rest of them, I never learned anything. From conversations with the officers, I became convinced that the objective of the repressive action was the physical extermination of the prisoners. Although I never had any direct indication of what happened during the transports, other prisoners did. The hypothesis that one of the destinations of the prisoners was to be thrown into the sea from airplanes emerged from actions that were observed, fragmentary conversations with officers, stories told by the guards about a prisoner who was taken away by mistake and brought back from the airport. But it was always a taboo subject and any attempt at verification was forbidden. It was known among us that the list of those to be transported was drawn up in a meeting of intelligence officers (in the case of ESMA) which took place the day before. Also, a record of each captive was prepared, which was kept in the intelligence archives. At least after the date of my capture, everyone who arrived as a prisoner at ESMA was photographed and assigned a case number and an identifying record was prepared (sometimes including a test of political attitudes), which, according to the naval officers, was given to the First Corps of the army.

It seemed impossible to go on denying these facts. But eleven more years went by before Scilingo would tell the truth.

Chapter Nine

A Humanist in Uniform

IN 1983, the newly sworn-in president, Raúl Alfonsín, asked Congress to repeal the military's autoamnesty and asked the courts to prosecute the first three military juntas for homicide, unlawful deprivation of liberty, and application of torture to prisoners. He reformed the Code of Military Justice so that the rulings of the military courts could be appealed in the civil courts. All those who planned, organized, and controlled the operation of the machinery of repression, knowing it would produce extremely serious violations of human dignity, as well as those who took advantage of it for their personal benefit or with cruelty and perversity, were to be punished. But it was "imperative that those members of the armed forces and the law enforcement agencies who did not act on their own initiative when they participated in acts injurious to human dignity be offered the opportunity to serve the constitutional democracy loyally."

This last phrase was a first draft of Alfonsín's law of Due Obedience. But Congress established that there would be no possible excuse for "atrocious and aberrant actions"—such as torturing prisoners or throwing them out of airplanes alive into the sea.

The military courts ordered the rigorous preventive imprisonment of Massera and Videla. Massera was already in jail for the disappearance of Fernando Branca, the husband of one of his mistresses during a sailing party aboard the yacht Massera had used as commander in chief of the navy.

Branca's goods were sold at a loss over the following months, thanks to documents bearing his authorization that were legalized by the Argentine consul in Miami, who died after carrying out the task. The notary who registered other sales and the overseer of one of Branca's operations also suddenly died of heart failure. The serial number of a telegram in which Branca had supposedly notified his administrator that he was leaving on a trip in fact corresponded to a cable containing congratulations on a marriage that was sent to a member of Massera's family.

The correspondent of the Spanish daily paper *El País*, José Luis Martín Prieto, wrote, "The transcript of the trial was dripping with blood, semen and tears, adultery, high class prostitution, passion, murder, forgeries, deceptions, plundering, corruption, arrogance. And what does all the sordidness of the case matter—it could be asked—next to the drama of military intervention and all the horrors of the Navy School of Mechanics? It matters, and matters a great deal. Until the Branca case, the members of the military who demolished their country in 1976 could retrospectively appear to be a group of misguided gentlemen who fell into the error of believing that the end, a good end, justified the means. After the Branca case, Admiral Massera and his comrades are seen in a new and more illustrative light: as men who, in the name of Christian civilization and the sacred principle of the Fatherland, were sleeping with a business partner's wife, then

killed the business partner and divided up his goods, as leftist revolutionaries were screaming under torture in the prisons.”

When Massera made his statement to the military court, he said that during the dirty war the navy had jurisdiction only over the sea, the rivers, their banks, and the port zones. When the general who was presiding over the tribunal asked him if he had ever received any information regarding kidnappings, secret detention centers, torture, assassinations, or violations of decency and sexual freedom, Massera replied unhesitatingly: “At no time.”

He added that every month he visited each unit and warned those in command “to act with prudence because within two or three years, or five or six or seven, as is happening now, yesterday’s heroes were going to become tomorrow’s enemies. If there have been excesses in anything, they must be isolated excesses that will have to be analyzed.” Massera passed the responsibility off onto his subordinates: “It isn’t because the admiral gives the order that operations are carried out,” he said, “it’s because those beneath want to carry them out.” The general asked again, “Did you have any knowledge of excesses that led to the execution of prisoners without any type of trial?”

“No, Mr. President,” he answered.

Massera denied the very existence of the clandestine concentration camps. One of the members of the tribunal wanted to know if there were any prisoners in places other than the designated ones such as jails or police stations.

“According to the information I have, no, sir. No person was detained in any navy facility,” he said.

He was also asked what meaning he gave to the term “annihilate.” “A conceptual one, because the navy doesn’t have an operative dictionary where the term ‘annihilate’ is defined,” Massera answered.

“The annihilation of subversion—did it justify the adoption of extreme measures such as torture, illegal imprisonment, homicide?” he was asked.

“Obviously not. None of the objectives of the process of national reorganization can justify what the president is referring to. On the contrary, the general conception of the process’s activities was Western, humanist, Christian. I once pointed out that man should be the end of politics and not the target. In other words, man is the primordial thing. During the war against subversion, some mistakes may have been made. But if you ask me to mention one of them I cannot, because I reject the idea that excesses may have been committed; if any excesses were committed, within the sphere of the navy each time there was an awareness of something an investigation was carried out. Unfortunately, the tabloid press has mounted a campaign of slander and has made the population believe in some way in the unethical conduct of the armed forces, a notion which I spurn right now,” said the leader who gave the order to use torture in interrogating prisoners.

“What were the limits placed on the freedom of action granted at the various operative levels?” the president of the tribunal wished to know.

“It could not exceed the limits of the lawful principles of warfare.”

“Did you have any knowledge of the alleged irregularities that occurred within the navy’s area of responsibility?”

“No, Mr. President. The information was very vague. The accusations that are being formulated are accusations woven together by prepared witnesses who are trying to fabricate a responsibility on the part of the armed forces. At that time there was no knowledge of any complaint about the supposed facts that are being alluded to today,” Massera insisted.

Then he was queried about a Swedish teenager, 17-year-old Dagmar Hagelin, and the French nuns, all abducted by ESMA task forces. The two cases had extensive international repercussions because of the nationalities and identities of the victims. “I don’t remember the issue of Sweden and France ever coming up.

I remember the events because they were in my time and of course an investigation was attempted within the capacity that the force had, without any positive result," he answered. He denied that there had ever existed an operative plan "based on manifestly illegal methods and procedures," and he "emphatically" rejected the idea that "thousands of people were illegally deprived of their freedom, tortured, and killed," and said that the Navy School of Mechanics had been chosen "as the particular target to be discredited. Fantastical and slanderous accusations emerged that I assert will never be proven because they are false." He added that "in the navy there do not exist nor have there ever existed public or secret regulations intended to safeguard procedures that are at variance with the principles of ethics."

Massera's successor at the navy, Admiral Armando Lambruschini, was also questioned by the military courts. "We are living in a time of great confusion in which the highest ethical values have been thrown into disarray. Let's suppose that a cancer has appeared, subversion, which seeks to disrupt the Argentine way of life and operations are undertaken to eradicate it. Over time, it turns out that the cancer was good and the eradication was bad," he said. He did not remember any details about the operations.

A few days later, the National Commission on the Disappeared delivered its final report. To the crimes of the terrorists, the report stated, the armed forces responded with an infinitely worse terrorism, bringing about the greatest and most savage tragedy of Argentine history, which attained the shadowy category of crimes against humanity. With the technique of disappearance and its consequences, all the ethical principles of the great religions and the most lofty philosophies erected over thousands of years of suffering and disaster were trampled on and barbarically ignored, it said.

These words caused a commotion in the country and stupefaction in the barracks. At that point, the government and a good part of the population had only recently become aware of the breadth

and depth of the horror that for so many years had been denounced only by its victims and various human rights organizations.

The enormous documentation assembled by the National Commission on the Disappeared proved that human rights had been violated in an institutional and nationwide manner, with similar kidnappings and identical tortures throughout the country—which destroyed the theory of individual excesses. With particular passion, the commission described the situation of the disappeared person: from the moment of abduction, the victim lost all rights; he or she was cut off entirely from the outside world, imprisoned in unknown places, made to endure hellish torments, kept in ignorance of his near or immediate future, and subject to being thrown into the river or the sea with blocks of cement on his feet, or burned to ashes; and these were living creatures who maintained all the attributes of human beings: sensitivity to torture, the memory of their mothers, their children, their wives, shame at public violation—beings possessed by infinite anguish and supreme terror, but who kept a wild gleam of hope in some distant corner of their souls.

The commission certified that it had registered the cases of nearly nine thousand of these forsaken souls, but stated that it had every reason to suppose that the actual number was higher, because many families hesitated to file a complaint about the kidnappings for fear of reprisals.

A synthesis of the commission's report was published under the title *Nunca Más*. The English edition, also titled *Nunca Más* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1986), reports on page 221, under the subtitle, "Prisoners thrown into the sea":

This is scarcely credible, but is mentioned by many witnesses; some because they had heard about it, others because of direct references made by their captors. Then there were the bodies washed up by currents on the shore. It is indeed difficult to believe, but in the general context of this savage repression one can imagine that for those who practiced it, it was just one more method among many with the same purpose.

The commission linked the testimony of the survivors to a news article that appeared in 1983 about thirty-seven corpses that had been picked up on various beaches. "The sea, which has very irregular currents in the gulf region, washed them up onto the sand in an extremely disfigured condition. On some bodies, unmistakable signs of violence were observed: salt water and hungry fish had disfigured almost all of them. All of them came from the open sea. They may have fallen from a ship or have been thrown out of airplanes, in the opinion of an expert"—a decade before Scilingo's confession.

The day following the release of the commission's conclusions, the military tribunal notified the civil courts that it could not hand down a ruling within the allotted time and declared that "the decrees, directives, operational orders, etc., that governed the military activity against the terrorist subversion were, with respect to form and content, unobjectionable."

The tribunal also maintained that deprivation of freedom was not illegitimate in the case of persons who had broken the law and stated its belief that the prosecution was motivated by the complaints of persons who were implicated, or their family members, and whose objectivity and credibility were therefore relative. As the orders given were unobjectionable, the military council did not acknowledge any possible responsibility on the part of the former high command other than for their lack of control over the illicit deeds that their subordinates may have committed. Once again, the guilt lay with the lower ranks.

The civil courts took over the case that the military tribunal had no intention of proceeding with, and in April 1985, public hearings began in the trial of nine former commanders in chief of the armed forces, among them three former military presidents.

Chapter Ten

The Judgment of Mankind

THE MEMBERS of the military juntas who had made the entire society tremble until just a few years before rose respectfully to their feet on the order of a young clerk each time the members of the federal chamber that was judging them returned to the courtroom. But all nine denied having ordered the use of methods that were injurious to human rights. They did not acknowledge the facts and accused the concentration camp survivors of fabricating their testimony about a descent into hell. They suggested that their judges, too, were part of a sinister conspiracy against the virtuous guardians of the nation. If any mistake had been made, it was the responsibility of their subordinates.

Victims and victimizers told their respective stories during the trial's public hearings, which went on throughout 1985.

Vice Admiral Luis María Mendía was in charge of naval operations and was responsible for formulating, writing, and carrying out the navy's plans, in fulfillment of the decrees of the

National Executive Power ordering that the activities of the subversive elements be annihilated.

Mendía said that according to the dictionary, “annihilate” means “destroy, reduce to nothing.” He explained that “the armed forces are violent, destructive, they have no half-measures. We don’t use tear gas. If gases are used, they’re lethal gases.” He cited Clausewitz’s phrase on war and politics and said that according to the decrees of the Executive Power, adopted before the coup that overthrew the government of Isabel Perón, politics had exhausted its possibilities without overcoming the destructive effects of terrorism. “We were facing a war.”

Mendía insisted that the navy had not acted in fragmented factions or in paramilitary form, but institutionally, in accordance with its permanent operative organization. He also denied that there had been clandestine or illegal detention centers. He said that suspects were summarily interrogated at naval facilities by intelligence officers. If their lack of connection with any subversive organization was proven, they were freed. If their participation in such groups was determined, they remained under detention “for the necessary and prudent time” and then passed into the hands of “the corresponding legal authority.” Once it was established whether or not they were involved, “the corresponding process was initiated.” “The appropriate steps” were taken.

“Was the clause of the plan according to which the detention would last no longer than forty-eight hours, in order for a declaration to be taken, complied with?”

“It was complied with insofar as possible. The standard procedure was to take the time that was necessary. Sometimes forty-eight hours was not enough.”

“How did the intelligence personnel conduct the interrogations?”

“They were conducted in compliance with the regulations on interrogations.”

“Do you remember those regulations?”

“In a natural, noncoercive way, calmly, and without pressure on the interrogated person.”

Next, Vice Admiral Pedro Santamaría, the former top ranking officer of the coast guard, swore to tell the truth. He was asked if he recalled the appearance of corpses along the coast.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” answered the man who was responsible for the movements of the Skyvan planes.

The French Admiral Antoine Sanguinetti, who in 1977 had been part of an international delegation that investigated the disappearance of the nuns and another sixteen French citizens, also made a declaration. Massera had told the delegation, “I acknowledge that there are some groups in the army that are out of control. One could call them Fascists, if the term were not so unpleasant. I disapprove of this situation, for which I am not responsible. The navy and the air force have no responsibility.” He invited them to visit a naval base to verify that there were no *desaparecidos* there.

The journalist Jacobo Timerman told the judges about a strange lunch in Buenos Aires’s most luxurious hotel with one of Massera’s closest collaborators, Captain Carlos Bonino, shortly after the coup d’état.

He explained their theory of repression to me, in a kind and dispassionate tone. He said that it had to be irreversible, because that was the only way of eliminating subversion forever. Anyone who might be linked to subversion, whether they were children, parents, or relatives, had to disappear. It was a sacrifice Argentina had to make and it would be worth it.

“It would be better to declare martial law and use the death penalty, but with the opportunity to mount a defense in front of a tribunal,” I argued with him.

“We’re in a hurry. We don’t have time. In a situation like that, the pope would intervene, and it would be very difficult to send people to the firing squad against the pope’s wishes,” he answered me.

“But Franco sent people to the firing squad against the pope’s opposition,” I insisted.

“We’re not in a position to do that,” he replied.

Timerman added that during the same lunch, an executive of the Italian multinational Olivetti had asked about the man who was responsible for an attempt at poisoning the food of naval officers. Bonino answered him, without any change of tone: "We threw him into the ocean."

In the months that elapsed between the March 1976 coup and his own abduction in April 1977, Timerman, who was then the editor of the daily paper *La Opinión*, also met with Massera. "I tried to convince him of the necessity of exerting repression within a legal framework. 'Don't worry about that. Go on a vacation—everything will work out. This isn't a world in which we can acknowledge what we're doing, but it's going to end quickly,' he answered."

The prosecutor, Julio Strassera, asked Timerman to say more about the international pressure Massera said was keeping them from exerting repression within a legal structure. Timerman responded: "He said what all the navy men said, that against the pope's protests it's impossible to send people to the firing squad. He told me that the country's international credit, managed by the minister of economic affairs, would be affected," Timerman answered.

Marta Bettini de Devoto testified that she had never again heard from her husband, Lieutenant Junior Grade Jorge Devoto, after the day he went to the headquarters of the commander in chief of the navy to ask about a man who had disappeared.

"Did your husband hear comments from his colleagues about how the repression was being carried out?" she was asked.

"A lot. I myself heard that they were throwing people into the sea from navy planes and that some of them were troubled by their consciences."

The Catholic priests Orlando Yorío and Francisco Jalics were kidnapped in May 1976 and taken to ESMA, where they were asked about their friend, the former nun Mónica Quinteiro. After five months of captivity, "They gave us an injection. They said it

was a vaccine. We were very dizzy, and they put us in a truck. It stopped, they gave us another injection, and moved us to another vehicle, which had a grooved floor. In that vehicle, they gave us a third injection and I lost consciousness," Yorío said.

But the priests lived to tell the tale. "When I came to," Yorío testified, "I was lying on fresh grass, blindfolded but otherwise unshackled. We were like drunks, in the middle of the countryside, in the dark, surrounded by swamps. A farmer told us that the previous afternoon he had seen a helicopter landing. There wasn't any other way to get there."

The same day Yorío spoke, Captain Oscar Quinteiro, then seventy-three years old, whose daughter Mónica was abducted as she left her job at a military life insurance company, told the court about his nightmare. Quinteiro paid a visit to the president of the company, an army general, who showed him the employee time chart for that day: his daughter had left the office in normal fashion. His peregrination continued to the ministry of the interior, where General Albano Harguindeguy informed him that Mónica did not figure on any register of prisoners. By means that he did not reveal, Quinteiro learned that his daughter was at the Navy School of Mechanics, but the school's assistant director, Salvio Menéndez, also denied that. "From the way he answered, I realized he wasn't telling the truth," Quinteiro testified. "Since I insisted, he went into another room. He said he was going to see if her name appeared. When he returned, he repeated that she did not appear on any list. I thanked him and left him my telephone number." The only person who called him was the general from the insurance company to say that if Mónica did not reappear within three days he would put her on notice with a certified telegram and in another ten days she would be fired. But since she was a good employee, she could have her job back if she reappeared.

Quinteiro met six times with his former student Emilio Massera. The first time he asked for Massera's authorization to present an appeal for habeas corpus to the courts.

"No, Captain. I will see to this personally and will keep you informed," Massera answered.

His daughter's fellow workers told him that she had been arrested as she left the office. For the second time, Quinteiro went back to see the director of the company where she had worked.

"Look, Captain, I take good care of the personnel. If someone had come, you would be the first person I would have told," the man repeated.

Months later, Quinteiro reprehended the company's assistant director, a vice commodore of the air force.

"You know and you must tell me."

"A major and two policemen came to get her. Since the director was busy, they were sent to my office. I was opposed to their arresting her there and suggested to them that I have someone call her so that they could recognize her," the vice commodore admitted.

Quinteiro could hardly go on with his story. "The assistant director asked an employee to call my daughter and had her taken to an office with glass walls and curtains. Through the glass walls, those men saw my daughter. I would like you to put yourselves in my place when I learned this, so much later, and told by the man who did it himself, when the director had sworn to me that it hadn't happened. Sad and indignant, I went directly to the commander in chief of the navy and told him that I was going to file a lawsuit."

"Wait, first I'm going to talk to the vice commodore," Massera said, cutting him off.

The vice commodore said he would not be able to identify the men who kidnapped Mónica. Only then did Massera give Quinteiro permission to undertake judicial action, which as usual had no results.

In one of their conversations, Massera told Quinteiro that neither the army nor the navy was holding his daughter, and that

it only remained to check with the air force. "Admiral, many officers are lying to you," the despairing father answered, still trusting his colleague's sincerity.

"Did you come to any conclusions about which branch of the military arrested your daughter and what her fate was?" the court asked him.

"From what the priest Orlando Yorio told me, I have no doubt that she was at ESMA and that the commander in chief of the navy was perfectly aware not only of what was going on with my daughter but of everything that was happening in his force. The day of the national holiday, Yorio heard a speech that ended with the ritual salute, 'School of Mechanics, subordination, and courage' and the response 'To serve the fatherland.' In the basement where he was being held, he heard someone say, 'Ay, Orlando,' and recognized my daughter's voice."

"What did Massera say when you told him they were lying to him?" the prosecutor asked.

"He didn't give any answer at all."

The tribunal asked Alejandro Hugo López, a conscripted soldier who had once worked at ESMA, "Did you hear anything about the fate of the prisoners?"

"Yes. In the construction storeroom I saw a tub that was six feet long and a foot high, with a grill on top. On one side was a tube with an upright funnel. They put the bodies in there and added gasoline through the funnel. That's how they would disappear," he answered.

Then he added, "There were two ways of disappearing: flight or grill."

The former ESMA cadet Jorge Carlos Torres recalled for the tribunal that, "The noncommissioned officer told us they were going to burn a body. Beyond the athletic field, fires could often be seen."

Retired Commander Jorge Félix Búsico, a former director of studies at ESMA, said that every day he saw columns of vehicles

coming in with hooded prisoners but he never saw them leaving. Twice he heard screams of pain.

“Did you ever see instruments of torture?”

“I didn’t see them, but people were talking about a device that was used. It was hard for me to accept. I had no desire to know. I resisted accepting that naval officers would do that.”

“Was anyone killed?” he was asked.

“A whole jargon appeared: suck in (*chupar*; for abductions), wall in (*tabicar*; for blindfolding), send up (*mandar para arriba*), which meant execution. It was commonly used in ESMA when someone died, unfortunately. I saw helicopters operating in the parade square, which is the nerve center of the school, and in less visible places.”

Búsico was removed from the task forces for having questioned the use of false names.

“What did the director and assistant director of ESMA say when they reprimanded you for identifying yourself in front of the prisoners?” a judge asked him.

“That these were covert operations and all the officers had to conceal their names.”

“Did they give any reasons why?”

“At my insistence, Admiral Chamorro said that it was a matter of confusing the enemy. They shouldn’t know if their comrades had been captured or had left the country, either. This would undermine their morale.”

“What was your reply to that?”

“That it didn’t seem right to me and that I doubted whether these methods were militarily apt, since they had ended in disaster in other places in the world where they were used. The whole thing frightened me a great deal. When I worked up the nerve to bring the matter up again, I saw that it was rigidly decided on.”

“Did you know any other dissidents?”

“Among the officers who weren’t affected by the fight against subversion the subject was avoided, but human life had no

value, it didn’t matter whose it was. There was a refusal to speak. It was difficult for an officer to bring up his disagreement very often.”

“And at the other places where you were stationed?”

“The same as at ESMA. Those who were not participating felt dissociated from it. That is not my case; I felt like an accomplice.”

“Why do you say ‘accomplice?’”

“Because I collaborated with my silence. I didn’t have the courage to denounce it.”

His career ended abruptly. At the end of 1977, he was informed that because he had gotten a divorce he would not be selected for command duties, despite having been congratulated for having reorganized and placed on a wartime footing the communication system of the Argentine navy’s only aircraft carrier, of which he was second in command.

Rosario Evangelina Quiroga was arrested in Montevideo, the capital of neighboring Uruguay, transported in secret to Buenos Aires, and held at ESMA. “The hallway leading to the torture chambers was identified by a sign that said ‘Avenue of Happiness,’” Quiroga testified to the court. “When they were torturing, they would play a record at high volume to hide the screams. In one of the torture chambers there was a cross on the wall, which was said to have been drawn by one of the French nuns.” She added that those “about whose subsequent fate we had no knowledge whatsoever,” were called “the transported ones . . . because they didn’t come back to the school. All the naval officers that served at or attended ESMA and frequented the officers’ club had contact with the prisoners, or knew about their presence in that establishment, because it was inevitable that they saw them shackled or handcuffed and hooded.” The prisoners could be freed, as happened to her, or “be transported to another clandestine detention camp; or be eliminated.” A priest in the military vicar’s office obtained a

Venezuelan visa for her at the request of her captors, and Rolón took her to the Ezeiza airport.

Graciela Daleo told the court that the day she was arrested she was led to ESMA's torture room number 13. Pernías warned her: "You're in our hands. If you don't talk, you're going up. You're going to tell us who your comrades are." While they applied electric charges to her body, she "screamed out Ave Marias and that enraged him. Pernías had a crucifix and a medal of the miraculous Virgin around his neck." Afterward "They put me in a car. After making a few turns, which I believe were within ESMA itself, they took me out. Pernías informed me that because I refused to give away my comrades they had decided to shoot me. There was one shot and then someone said: 'What lousy aim.'

"They touched my jacket. One of them said: 'Take it off her, I want it for my wife.'

"There were three more shots. Then they made me kneel, they put a gun to my temple, and they fired off another shot into the air." She added that one day Captain Acosta, the leader of the task force, told her: "I talk with baby Jesus every day. If he says you have to die, I give you a penthonal and you go up."

According to Miriam Lewin, another survivor, "From stories told by the guards and some prisoners, it was known that (the transported prisoners) received an injection of penthonal in the basement, they were loaded onto trucks, and rumor had it that they were then thrown into the sea from airplanes."

A small group of prisoners was selected for what the navy called a "recuperation process," led by Rolón. The former prisoner Andrés Castillo testified that he was able to identify Rolón when a group of prisoners were transported to a ranch on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. As they were going through a very well-known neighborhood, the navy man commented, "All this belonged to my grandfather, but since he squandered his fortune there's only one avenue left.'

"Your name is Rolón,' I told him.

"How do you know?' he said, startled.

"This is where two avenues, Fondo de la Legua (End of the Mile) and Rolón, begin. Your grandfather couldn't have been named End of the Mile.'

"He laughed and admitted I was right."

Like Penelope, Castillo wrote, on his captors' orders, a history of Argentine trade unionism which he then destroyed. Rolón "told me personal things. He had gone through a separation and then remarried. He brought me soccer magazines, and to keep me from being killed he said it would have disrupted the recuperation process of the seven other prisoners who were friends of mine. At Christmas, he brought me a loaf of fruit cake his sister-in-law had baked. He was a bit touched. I don't want to excuse him, but he did have a sense of guilt. He told me, 'I'm on duty and a bunch of prisoners came in. I can't take that machine (the electric cattle prod) any more.'"

The son of a naval officer who was obliged to retire because of personal conflicts with his superior officer and who was never able to adjust to civilian life, Rolón grew up with the mandate to fulfill his father's truncated career. While serving at the Navy School of Mechanics, he married a niece of the minister of economic affairs under the military dictator José Martínez de Hoz. His in-laws suggested that he ask for retirement and become the administrator of a family business, where he would earn five times more than in the navy and would not be in any danger. After thinking it over, Rolón rejected the offer. He believed that ESMA torture chambers were an unavoidable port of call on his voyage to an admiralship.

According to various testimonies, he was the officer who treated the prisoners best. One of them was about to be freed. A week before the announced date, Rolón entered his cell and showed him a newspaper. On the front page was a photograph of a member of the Shah of Iran's police force being chased by a

group of women who were fighting to tear off his uniform. The prisoner gave the newspaper back without saying anything. In the concentration camp, it wasn't a good idea to say much.

"What do you think of that?" Rolón asked.

"What do I think of what?"

Rolón pointed to the photo. The prisoner picked up the newspaper again and confined himself to saying, "A Savak officer who's having some problems."

"Yes. But what do you think of it?"

"In what sense?" the prisoner, whose life depended on the navy man's mood, eluded the question again.

"Do you think it would be possible here?" Rolón asked.

The complex relationship between victims and victimizers did not allow for linear responses.

"If you're asking me if it's possible that a crowd could run after all of you in the street, I would say that I don't think so," the prisoner began. "If what you want to know is whether you will ever be asked to account for what you did, my opinion is that you will be."

"How we will be asked to account?" Rolón continued.

"I don't know. We've done a lot of stupid things, but you've committed atrocities and you'll have to explain them," the prisoner hazarded.

"You think there will be some kind of trial?"

"Yes."

Rolón asked the question the prisoner feared most: "If there were a trial, would you testify?"

The prisoner had no alternative. If he lied and Rolón realized he was lying, he would lose his confidence. If he told the truth, it might enrage Rolón.

"Yes," he answered.

"And what would you say?" Rolón asked.

"The truth."

"You'd say that I don't like torturing?"

"Yes, because it's the truth."

For an instant, there was a balance in the seesaw of power.

"Would you say that when I'm on intelligence duty I shut myself up in my room and turn off the light?"

"Yes."

"And that I don't answer when they call me, so they'll think I'm not there and someone else will interrogate the new prisoners?"

"I would say that, because it's the truth. But I would also talk about those you did torture," the prisoner concluded.

Rolón said nothing more and left the cell. A week later, together with a younger officer, Rolón drove the prisoner to the airport, where he flew off to freedom. The airplane flew over the highway on which Rolón and Astiz would return to the School of Mechanics. That prisoner would be one of the witnesses in the 1985 trial.

A former prisoner Carlos Muñoz informed the judges that at ESMA there was a file on each prisoner, which was micro-filmed. It contained the prisoner's name, his number, his background, his story as he had written it at ESMA, the names of those who abducted him, the date, the political group he belonged to, and the sentence. *T* meant transport and *L* liberty. "In 1979, when the three women testified in Paris, I was ordered to look for their case files. There were five thousand cases in four boxes of microfilm, and there were very few *L*'s among them. That was where I got a sense of the dimensions of the slaughter," Muñoz said.

Against all this evidence, Massera denied everything once more in his personal statement before the judges. "Everyone knows that you don't transform officers and noncommissioned officers of the army, the air force and the navy into a gang of surprising assassins which from one day to the next loses all sense of ethics."

But it didn't happen from one day to the next. The former naval officer Julio César Urien, who later participated in

the Montonero guerrilla movement and spent the entire dictatorship period in prison, was sent in 1971 to ESMA, where he took a course in antissubversive fighting. "The idea was to involve everyone. We acted as paramilitary men, learning to follow, abduct, and break someone," he told U.S. journalist Tina Rosenberg.

"Break? How?"

"By torture."

During the course, Urien was assigned the role of the communist enemy leader. "We did exercises in which they really tortured me with electric charges, by hanging me from a bar and with the submarine—putting my head under water. Then they studied my reactions. They taught us that torture was a moral way of fighting the enemy. In that way, they isolated us from society. They brought in priests who said, 'Yes, that's OK.' Some of the men had problems with learning to torture. But the conditioning was that whoever didn't torture was weak," he said.

With an actor's gestures, Massera recited a speech by someone else which he had memorized in prison: "I haven't come here to defend myself. I've come, as always, to take responsibility for everything done by the men of the navy while I had the incomparable honor of being their commander in chief. I also take responsibility for the men of the security and police forces." He extended that responsibility "to the errors that may have been committed" by his subordinates.

"I and I alone have the right to sit in the defendant's seat," he boasted, his gaze fixed on the six judges.

Nonetheless, he did not acknowledge any of the acts that took place on his orders. "I feel responsible, but I do not feel guilty," he said, before reaching the following Olympian conclusion: "My judges may control the daily news, but I am in command of history, and that is where the final verdict will be heard."

Responsibility without guilt, the isolated mistakes of subordi-

nates, which are assumed in the serene consciousness of a historical mandate. The same rhetorical smokescreen as always. Scilingo is irritated at the memory of it. What kept him from sleeping, as much or more than the flights, was the persistent hypocrisy of the men who ordered him to carry them out.

Chapter Eleven

All or None

THE ARMED forces had grudgingly accepted the prosecution of their former leaders without ever acknowledging their guilt. But the officers on active duty, the direct executors of the atrocious and aberrant acts ordered by their superiors, threatened an uprising each time the arm of the law pointed toward them. With the same logic as Scilingo, they would see themselves only as cogs in a hierarchical, institutional machine, whose responsibility would have to be collective and could not be measured by the yardstick of the civil penal code, which sets forth punishments for criminal acts committed by individuals of their own free will.

The warrant for the arrest of Captains Gustavo Adolfo Alsina and Enrique Mones Ruiz precipitated the first military crisis in the army, in June 1984. The arrest of Astiz did the same in the navy, six months later.

Alsina was put on trial for the torture and death of Dr. José

René Moukarzel, who was placed in stocks in a prison courtyard in freezing weather as a punishment for having received a packet of salt from another prisoner. For twelve hours he was beaten and buckets of water were thrown on his naked body. When he was taken to the infirmary, Alsina prevented anyone from attending to him. When a soldier informed him of the death of the tortured man, Alsina answered, "Congratulations, you've just killed a subversive." A prison official threw the doctor's eyeglasses into his former cell and announced to his cellmates: "That's all that's left of the Turk."

Mones Ruiz had to answer for the murder of the prisoner Raúl Augusto Bauducco, a murder that is representative of the arbitrary way in which human life was taken. During a tour of inspection, Bauducco was beaten with rubber batons and forced to remain with his arms against the wall. After two hours he could no longer maintain the position.

"Raise them or I'll kill you," Corporal Miguel Angel Pérez screamed at him.

"I can't, sir," Bauducco answered. Pérez requested permission. Mones Ruiz gave it to him. The noncommissioned officer shot the prisoner in the head point-blank. "Bauducco tried to take the gun away," Mones Ruiz later reported.

A group of officers threatened a large-scale rebellion as a way of asking a federal judge to stop bothering their comrades. His honor was not insensitive to their pleas and transferred the proceedings to a military court, which gave instructions for Mones Ruiz and Alsina to be set free.

The officers at ESMA took the names of animals as aliases. Chamorro was "the Dolphin," Acosta "the Tiger," Pernías "the Rat," Astiz "the Raven," and Scilingo doesn't remember. The second crisis was provoked when charges were brought against the Raven by another federal judge during the torrid December of 1984 and this crisis lasted throughout the subsequent summer. The Council of Admirals convened and demanded that

Astiz not be subjected to a lineup or to any confrontation with witnesses and that he be allowed to present himself in uniform—a point of honor for the navy—though the complaint stated that when he abducted Swedish teenager Dagmar Ingrid Hagelin he was wearing civilian clothing. This trial, too, was transferred to a military court, which absolved Astiz. The ruling was appealed to the Federal Chamber of Appeals, which held that although Astiz's participation in the kidnapping had been proven, the action against him was invalid because of the amount of time that had elapsed. This type of compromise was typical of Alfonsín's government: guilty but allowed to go free.

Three of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, with their white handkerchiefs on their heads, waited for the judges to leave the courtroom, then shouted "Murderer!" and "Monster!" as Astiz went past. One of them had witnessed the abduction of the nuns and the ten family members of *desaparecidos* Astiz had betrayed with his kisses. From the back of the courtroom, one of Astiz's comrades in arms ordered, "Why don't they arrest that Marxist whore?"

The bailiff obeyed him.

When the time limit set by the Full Stop law was up, formal accusations had been processed against four hundred officers from the three armed services and from law enforcement agencies across the country. That number was fifteen times higher than the military had hoped and three or four times greater than its most pessimistic projections. The ESMA survivors identified one hundred and ten men stationed there who were responsible for four hundred cases, less than a tenth of all cases under investigation. The state prosecutor asked that only thirty-three of those officers be brought to trial, and the Federal Chamber agreed to bring only nineteen of them to trial, including six retired admirals and six officers on active duty. Among the latter were Astiz, Pernías, and the noncommissioned officer Antonio Azic, who had used the electric cattle prod on a twenty-day-old baby, the son of a prisoner.

The comrades of Mones Ruiz, Alsina, Pernías, Rolón, Scilingo, and Astiz went so far as to contemplate forming commando groups in order to resist the summonses and rescue Massera and Videla from prison. Pernías led an attempted uprising, which was checked by a persuasive comrade who spent an entire sleepless night convincing him that the navy as an institution would defend its men.

During a meeting of his cabinet, President Alfonsín proposed an escalation of measures to put down any uprising:

1. Discharge of any unit leader who gives asylum to an insurrectionist and does not guarantee handing him over to the courts.
2. Siege of any rebel unit with troops from the same branch of the armed forces and eventual recourse to troops from the other two branches if that is unavoidable.
3. Cutting off of food supplies, water, electricity, and gas.
4. National and international media campaign.
5. Public mobilization against the insurrectionists.
6. Use of weapons to subjugate them.

The navy's chief of staff presented a counterproposal: the navy would negotiate with the government as to an acceptable number of men to be placed on trial. It would have to be far fewer than was currently planned, and it was imperative to remove the symbolic Astiz from the list. The government refused. At 2:30 A.M. on Wednesday, February 25, 1984, the chief of staff sent a radiogram countersigned by the entire admiralty to units across the country. He described the situation as extremely serious because indictments were being bought against "certain of its men for a participation that extends to the entire navy." Nevertheless, the six retired admirals duly arrived at the courthouse under arrest, in a navy van and under the supervision of the general director of personnel. As in the dirty war, the navy continued to act vertically, in fulfillment of orders from the higher ranks. The following day, when he brought in

the remaining men who were under arrest, the navy's chief of intelligence warned one of the judges: "You are applying the penal code, but some of these men have seen me do worse things than those you are judging them for."

It was the same message Scilingo would repeat later: since many men did it, though there isn't evidence against all of them, none should be punished.

Chapter Twelve

Modus Operandi

IN THE unsworn statement he made to the Federal Chamber, Commander Jorge Eduardo Acosta, the former chief of intelligence of the ESMA task force, said that the school had been the unit especially designated to combat the Montoneros. The prosecutor asked him how many of them had been held at ESMA.

"I don't really have the precise number, but I would say, sir, that . . ." Acosta began to answer. Then he hesitated and asked for a significant clarification: "Including the dead ones?"

After thinking it over a long time, he answered that between 1976 and 1979, three hundred to five hundred prisoners had been rotated through ESMA. He classified them into two groups. If it was decided that they had no link to the guerrilla group, they were set free. After 1977, the decision was made not to kill the militants but to try to transform them into naval intelligence agents who would help bring the confrontation quickly to an end, he said. (Admirals Massera, Lambruschini, and

Mendía had taken offense at the very suggestion that prisoners might have taken part in intelligence tasks.)

"There was no one in between the two groups, who did have something to do with the Montoneros but refused to collaborate with you?" the court asked Acosta.

"There may have been. In that case, I believe they were . . . I know of some who were handed over to the Executive Power or, but I . . . What finally happened to them I don't know," Acosta floundered.

"Do you recall any individual case, of a person who may have been turned over to the Executive Power?" the prosecutor pressed him.

"Yes . . . it's Mrs. . . . a very young woman . . . whose husband . . . I can't tell you the surname, but maybe if I check I can give you the exact name. I think that her father was a noncommissioned army officer and he provided information that his daughter was in the terrorist organization so then she was picked up. She said, 'No, I'm not participating, I don't believe in any of that,' and went to the Executive Power."

Placement at the disposition of the Executive Power is an exceptional measure authorized by the Argentine Constitution in cases of external war or internal disruption and implies the suspension of individual rights and guarantees. During the military dictatorship, being placed in that situation was the equivalent of having one's life saved, because that way there was at least a record of the arrest. According to ESMA's chief of intelligence himself, this occurred once, out of five hundred cases. As for the rest, "Other organizations I don't know anything about came to get them."

The court wished to know how the fate of each prisoner was determined. Acosta described a mock trial in which life and death were at stake: "Something very similar to this, with all due respect, was convened. The commander and his staff were there. The prosecutor was the operations officer and the defense attor-

ney was the intelligence man. They took opposite positions. The operations man told what the prisoner said when arrested. The intelligence man argued that the prisoner said it because he was faking. And it went like that until the determination was reached," Acosta answered.

With the arrest of Acosta, Astiz, Pernías, and the other navy men, a countdown began that would culminate two months later. The navy conducted itself with a degree of institutional unity, that explains the difficulty even men like Scilingo, who were disillusioned by their superior officers, would have detaching themselves from the its discipline and its myths.

The army, on the other hand, fell apart.

"My jacket was stained in the dirty war, too," said a general from the Superior School of War.

"With tomato sauce," whispered a captain, the son of one of the generals who had been charged.

Seventy army officers on active duty demonstrated in the military quarter of Buenos Aires in solidarity with Mones Ruiz — who had once again been summoned by the courts — beneath a summer cloudburst. Some of them wore their uniforms and complained about the military leadership.

A week later, no less a personage than the aide to the chief of staff of the army, a lieutenant colonel on active duty, was arrested for aggravated homicide and accused of having shot three prisoners on the pretext that they were trying to escape. The very perversion of the system that was applied, the exemplary pretensions of barbarity itself, was what finally allowed light to be shed on this event.

The only survivor of the incident told the courts about the operation. Four prisoners were taken by the army officer from a prison in the province of Córdoba. The prison's female employees demanded that a receipt be signed before handing them over. After they had gone down a stretch of road, the lieutenant colonel had the prisoners taken out of the truck in which they

were being transported. The prisoner heard him say, "Prepare your weapons." Then the officer asked his men if they were ready. When he received an affirmative response, he ordered them to open fire. The prisoner heard shots and guttural sounds from someone who couldn't scream because he was gagged.

"This work is for shit," said one of the men who were doing the shooting.

"Get used to it—that's how war is," his commanding officer answered.

An officer removed the blindfold and gag from the remaining prisoner and led him to the fallen body of one of his comrades, which had a bullet hole in the right eyebrow. The bodies of the other two prisoners were lying a few steps away.

"Do you know why we killed them?" the officer asked. "Because you guys killed a corporal."

"I don't agree with killing anybody."

"It's too late for that. Now, when you go back to the jail, you'll tell the others everything you saw. Let them know that if they keep killing soldiers the same thing is going to happen to all of them. And you are number one on the list. Today you just barely got away with your life."

One of the men who was shot was the prisoner's brother.

The agitated young officers who did not accept being put on trial turned against the chief of staff of the army, who was not even capable of defending his own aide. Alsina and Mones Ruiz went to the media with a declaration stating, "The current top ranks of the military were part of the armed forces during the war against subversion and held posts of significant power. The due process which they did not demand from the successive military juntas they now seek to impose on subalterns who limited themselves to a strict compliance with orders." The third man accompanying them on that risky mission was Lieutenant Colonel Ernesto Guillermo Barreiro, a.k.a. "Nabo" (Fool), who had as obvious an interest as they did in the matter: charges had

been filed against him for his performance as the head torturer at La Perla, the concentration camp in Córdoba.

Another dangerous task was assigned to an officer who, accompanied by a group of young men, showed up wearing fatigues and a helmet in the Plaza de Mayo at the time of the Mothers' weekly rounds. "Freedom for the heroes of the war against subversion. Enough leftist trials. Freedom to our liberators," said their placards. Hebe Bonafini chased after them with a megaphone, shouting "Stool pigeons!" and "Cuckolds!" The Circle of Military Men stood by the "young men who only acted out of the fullness of their patriotic fervor" in pursuing their adversaries.

All three of the armed forces were wrenched by heated arguments about the responsibility of the superiors who gave the orders and the subordinates who executed them. A week before public hearings began in the trial of Pernías, Astiz, and the other men from the navy who had been charged, the crisis in the army exploded. On Wednesday, April 15, 1987, Lieutenant Colonel Barreiro did not arrive at his appointment with the judges and took refuge in an infantry regiment, whose commanding officer refused to arrest him. The other units in the garrison did not carry out the order to take him prisoner. A paratrooper captain explained the position of the rebels to the press: "We are being judged by people who don't even understand us. We military men have our *modus operandi*, too."

The largest military garrison in Buenos Aires was taken over by Lieutenant Colonel Aldo Rico. The rebellion of the soldiers with painted faces, the *carapintadas*, began in Easter Week 1987. In front of the legislative assembly and a few yards away from a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people that had gathered in the street outside. President Alfonsín proclaimed, "The democracy of the Argentine people is not open to negotiation."

But Rico warned that there would be no officers in the entire army who were prepared to arrest him.

"I'm going to get you out of there with cannon fire," threatened the general who was in charge of putting down the uprising.

"As soon as you do that, I'll fire a mortar into the crowd (which had gathered outside the garrison), and it will be up to you to explain that it wasn't your cannon that was badly aimed," Rico answered him. The general, who had also participated in the dirty war, did not insist upon the issue and his troops never achieved their objective.

That afternoon, approximately two thousand unarmed people were on the point of entering the rebel garrison, to put pressure on the commandos. When he realized that he was losing control of the situation, Alfonsín rushed to the site. On his return to the Plaza de Mayo after a dialogue with the rebel leader, he received an ovation from the crowd when he announced that "the mutinying men have changed their stance." But there was bewilderment and sharp whistles of disapproval when he added that among them were heroes of the Malvinas war, who had adopted a mistaken position without any intention of causing a coup d'état—exactly the opposite of what he had said to Congress. He concluded by asking the civilians who had entered the military garrison to withdraw, as the grand finale to an impressive political sleight of hand.

The upshot of all this was the law of Due Obedience, more a judicial ruling than a law, as was noted by the only judge on the Argentine Supreme Court who had the courage to declare it unconstitutional. The text of the law stated that all military men of a given rank would be exculpated for having obeyed the orders of their superiors. With that law, Alfonsín was able to fulfill his objective of excusing the aberrant and atrocious acts that had been committed against helpless prisoners. Congress approved the law under pressure from the military, and during the last week of June 1987, most of the military men who were being held on criminal charges recovered their freedom, among them Astiz and Pernías.

With his pardons of 1990 and 1991, Menem cut the knot that Alfonsín had begun to untie. But not even then did they succeed in turning over the most tragic page of modern Argentine history. Various human rights organizations demanded the discharge of all those pardoned. They were beyond the reach of the law, but there was no reason why they should be rewarded. At the end of every year, the battle began anew with the nominations for promotions from each branch of the armed forces.

During the proceedings against him, Astiz remained at the same rank. But in a demonstration of solidarity, the junior officers who had risen above him treated him as a superior, out of sympathy for what they called the destruction of his career and his life. "I was repudiated socially in various circles. I couldn't even visit my parents," Astiz complained to the military court during a hearing. In the following years, the gossip magazines would photograph him several times dancing in Buenos Aires discothèques. He went so far as to hit journalists and photographers, expose their film, and break their cameras.

In a dramatic news release sent to its subscribers throughout the world on Christmas Eve 1987, the France Press news agency alleged that "Astiz represents a veritable time bomb sitting on the desk of the head of state. The entire Argentine navy, from the lowest cabinboy to the officers of the high command, was mobilized behind Astiz to see to it that President Raúl Alfonsín authorized his promotion, under the threat of unleashing a new rebellion should he reject it." Alfonsín acceded to their demands, but simultaneously instructed the minister of defense to begin procedures to force Astiz into retirement.

According to Alfonsín's instructions, the promotion of an officer absolved by the courts could not be refused. But since Astiz, "for reasons that may or may not have been voluntary," had taken on special significance for the society, which condemns the methods of the terrorist state, his presence on active duty could pose a threat to the social fabric and have negative

repercussions on the military institutions. For that reason, "he must not remain on active duty."

Behind this intricate piece of reasoning was concealed the basic fact that Astiz's absolution by the courts was not related to his innocence but only to a law that came after the trial and was passed specifically to rescue him from jail. The claim that Astiz's sad notoriety had nothing to do with his own will is as unfair to him as it is to the victims who were deprived of the conclusion of the judicial process in which almost complete proof was presented of his guilt in the atrocious crime of abducting two nuns and ten family members of disappeared persons.

He was not removed from active duty because he was guilty, but because he was too well known. Being less notorious, the other three hundred kidnapers, torturers, and murderers who benefited from the law of Due Obedience had not only remained free of prosecution under the penal code, but could continue their military careers.

The navy did not comply with the order to retire Astiz. Pernías appeared on the list of promotions that Alfonsín signed without quibbling. But not only Pernías. A journalist who would later become the director of Menem's intelligence service pointed out the contradiction between the order of retirement for Astiz and the simultaneous promotion to vice admiral of Adolfo Mario Arduino, who had been Astiz's superior at ESMA and was also accused of human rights violations.

Arduino was the superior officer who, one day in 1977, ordered Scilingo to prepare for his first flight.

Part III *Alienation*