

Searching for the 'Disappeared'

The Boston Globe



Efforts by local filmmaker Juan Mandelbaum to find his former girlfriend in Argentina led him to make "Our Disappeared." (Bill Greene/Globe Staff)

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About four years ago in an idle moment at work, Brookline filmmaker Juan Mandelbaum decided to Google an old girlfriend from his university days in Argentina. He was curious to know what had happened to her: He guessed she was a teacher, or maybe a psychologist. He typed her name - Patricia Dixon - but nothing came up. He added "Argentina" and tried again. When her name did appear on the screen, Mandelbaum could only stare, frozen, in horror.

Dixon's name was on a list of "desaparecidos," one of thousands of people abducted, tortured, and "disappeared" by the military during the brutal right-wing military dictatorship in Argentina between 1976 and 1983. The last time he saw her they were both sociology students at the University of Buenos Aires. She was a cute, spirited young woman with a warm smile and bright, dark eyes who once gave him a rabbit for a birthday present.

"I was completely shocked, incredulous," says Mandelbaum. "It didn't jibe with my last image of her."

They'd only dated for a few months, and he was now an American citizen with a family and a successful film business, but he knew he needed to find out what had happened to her, as well as to other friends and acquaintances who had disappeared. "I realized how little I knew about what had happened to them," said Mandelbaum who is president of Geovision, a Watertown-based film production company.

Ever the visual artist, he envisioned his quest as a film - a "personal search for the souls of friends who disappeared in Argentina," as he wrote in an early film treatment. Over the next three years he traveled to Argentina six times to conduct interviews and document his search, a task that grew more disturbing as he uncovered details of the disappearances of Dixon and 11 others - classmates, co-workers at a summer camp, children of family friends - who had once been at the center or periphery of his life. His documentary, "Our Disappeared" ("Nuestros Desaparecidos") opens in Boston Thursday at the

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Mandelbaum grew up in Buenos Aires, the son of German immigrants who fled Germany to escape World War II; his father was an executive in a grain-trading company. The Buenos Aires of his youth was a vibrant city where "the level of sophistication was very, very high," says Mandelbaum, 57, who developed a passion for photography and film at a young age. (He still has vivid memories of the movies he saw as a teen: "French new wave, Italian neo-realism, Polish, Czech . . .")

It was also a time of intense political fervor, inspired in part by the Cuban revolution ("Che Guevara was our martyred hero"), driven by demands for social justice and equality. "It was incredibly easy to be a revolutionary," said Mandelbaum, who was in a radicalized sociology program of the University of Buenos Aires where he read only Marxist authors, and where radical groups of all stripes were recruiting students into their ranks, most successfully followers of exiled president Juan Perón. "It was such an exciting time. You had the feeling we were going to change the country."

Still, as someone whose family had been touched by violence in Nazi Germany - he'd lost two grandparents to that war - he was something of a skeptic. "I thought Peronism sounded fine, and the revolution sounded fine, and making things more equal sounded like what I wanted," said Mandelbaum. "But I was not comfortable with the glorification of violence . . . I was more like an observer."

He opted for quieter ways to effect social change, working in a Buenos Aires slum in the early 1970s where he coordinated a weekly film series; working in a summer camp for poor children in Patagonia. But some of his friends took a harder line. Mini Viñas, who also worked at the summer camp, joined the Montoneros, a radical Peronist group which had urban guerilla units. Jorge Chinetti, another camp colleague and a physical education teacher, became active in a teachers' union. Though Mandelbaum was unaware at the time, his former girlfriend Patricia Dixon dropped out of school and also joined the Montoneros.

Perón returned to power in 1973, died a year later, and was replaced by his wife, Isabel. On March 24, 1976, the Perón government was overthrown by a military junta and "things got really bad, really quickly," Mandelbaum said. There were killings every day, part of a strategy to eliminate leftist opposition. People were dragged from their schools or workplaces to detention centers where they were interrogated and brutally tortured. Hundreds of their children were given up for adoption to military families. Death squads were a dark and constant presence: "You'd see a Ford Falcon with no license plates and if you'd look really carefully maybe you'd see the barrel of a shotgun," he said. "And maybe there was someone in the trunk."

About 250 of Mandelbaum's schoolmates were among the disappeared. His friend Viñas vanished. So did Chinetti. A colleague of Mandelbaum's father lost his three oldest children, including a pregnant daughter. A close friend of Mandelbaum's mother lost her son. "I knew about [the deaths] but not the details," said Mandelbaum. "It's something no one would talk about. You heard it once and that was it." Mandelbaum himself was stopped several times and searched by soldiers with machine guns. Finally, weary of the violence, he decided to leave Argentina in 1977 with his new girlfriend, now his wife, Clara Sandler, a voice teacher at New England Conservatory.

He studied at the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, then moved to Boston to work as a film producer. In 1989 he founded Geovision, a multifaceted company that produces documentaries and works in the public sector, including health education, specializing in work for Latino, African American, and Portuguese communities.

But recently much of his energy has been devoted to the Argentina film. When he discovered Dixon's name on the list of disappeared people, "he was whacked by it," said David Carnochan, the film's editor and co-producer. "This was not a subtle event for him. It was like showing up to a funeral, 30 years late."

Mandelbaum was worried, at first, that friends and family members of the victims would be reluctant to talk to him, but for the most part "everyone was surprisingly open and trusting," he said. In fact, despite his long absence they

still felt a strong connection to him. Patricia Dixon's sister still cherished photographs Mandelbaum had taken of her sister and had used one of them in a remembrance notice in a newspaper on the anniversary of Dixon's death.

Mandelbaum, who narrates the film in his characteristic gentle, unembellished manner, says he tried to minimize his own role in the story. "I was concerned about not upstaging their stories. I would have been mortified if my little stories were in any sense compared to the others," said Mandelbaum, who still has the black ringed daybooks he used in Argentina where he recorded his dates with Dixon, reminded himself of her birthday, even jotted notes about a dream he had about her.

In the course of making the film and interviewing friends and family of the disappeared, he got some of the answers he wanted. He learned that Dixon, who had gone underground, was snatched from her apartment on Sept. 5, 1977 and never seen again. Chinetti was dragged from the school where he was a teacher. Viñas was captured at a zoo where she'd gone with her 8-month-old daughter, Inés. When she saw military officers coming for her, she bravely walked toward them and left her baby on the grass, so she wouldn't be taken too. (A Swiss couple found the baby crying, and Inés eventually was reunited with relatives. She is now a lawyer living in Los Angeles.)

"Giving voice to these stories is a way of honoring the memories of these people," Mandelbaum said. "Their dream was what my dream was too. It's not such a bad thing to dream of a fairer society."

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