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Imagine going to your highschool reunion and finding that many of your classmates have disappeared—just vanished into thin air. For documentary filmmaker Juan Mandelbaum, as for thousands of Argentines who lived during the brutal military dictatorship of the late 70's, it's a reality: An Argentine truth commission found that at least 10,000 men, women and children were kidnapped, tortured and murdered. Join host Michel Martin for a conversation with the filmmaker about his most recent documentary on the disappeared in Argentina, and the daughter of one one of his disappeared friends, Ines Kuperschmit.

Transcript

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MICHEL MARTIN, host:

I'm Michel Martin, and this is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. Coming up, the hottest new Latin alternative groups. We'll find out who they are. But first, many of us have gone to our high school or college reunions to see what became of that old flame or whether or not that popular cheerleader is still cute. But imagine going back to your hometown and finding that many of your classmates have disappeared, just vanished into thin air.

For thousands of Argentines who lived during the brutal military dictatorship that began in 1976 and lasted until 1983, it is a reality. An Argentine truth commission found that at least 10,000 men, women and children were kidnapped, tortured, murdered or, in the case of infants born to political dissidents, handed over to other families to raise with no knowledge of their origins.

For Argentine documentary filmmaker Juan Mandelbaum, this is a personal story. In his recent film, "Nuestros Desaparecidos," or "Our Disappeared," which premiered this week on PBS, he goes in search of a college girlfriend and several other friends to try to find out what happened to them.

Juan Mandelbaum joins us now. We're also joined by the daughter of one of Juan's disappeared friends, Ines Kuperschmit. And I need to mention, some of the subject matter is very disturbing and may not be suitable for sensitive or younger listeners. And with that being said, Juan and Ines, thank you both so much for speaking with us.

Ms. INES KUPERSCHMIT: Thank you.

Mr. JUAN MANDELBAUM (Documentary Filmmaker): My pleasure. Thanks for having us.

MARTIN: Juan, many people might not be fully aware of the extent of the dictatorship in Argentina, and I want to play a clip from your documentary in which historian Jose Pablo Feinman(ph) talks about the effect of living with the repression or the fear of repression. He's interviewed in Spanish in the film. One of our staff members is translating for us. Here it is.

(Soundbite of film, "Nuestros Desaparecidos")

Mr. JOSE PABLO FEINMAN (Historian): (Through translator) The terror consists not only of killing those who have to die but also in killing innocent people so that everyone is scared. The terror

consists of carrying out a massacre but not letting the population know the entire truth about the massacre, only letting them know a few things.

For example, they left a refrigerated truck with corpses hanging like animals, and they'd abandoned it in some neighborhood, and it was talked about everyone, and then we know that the terror was real, it existed.

MARTIN: Juan, what happened during the dirty war in Argentina? Who was doing what to whom and why?

Mr. MANDELBAUM: You know, we'd had many military coups in Argentina since 1930. So the 1976 coup was actually very awaited. So we thought it was going to be another coup, and then, you know, after a few years the military is going to mess everything up and call for elections, again.

But this was after a particularly turbulent time in Argentine history. There was a lot of violence going on. There were left-wing groups that were trying to bring the country to socialism, and some of those were really mass movements that had also small guerrilla components. And then there was a brutal repression from the right with death squads called the Triple A, the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance. So it was a really, a very tense climate, and then came the military.

Well, what we didn't know is that they had a secret plan to basically eliminate anybody who was in some ways organized as part of the left, many students. Even high school students were detained and killed. There were over 340 secret detention centers all over the country, and very few people survived those centers.

MARTIN: You left during the dictatorship.

Mr. MANDELBAUM: Yes.

MARTIN: How did you leave, and why did you leave?

Mr. MANDELBAUM: Well, I had been involved in community work, which was probably enough to be suspicious, although I never felt immediately threatened, but I just couldn't stand living under that climate of fear anymore, and I just thought I was going to leave for a few years.

I went to study, did a graduate degree at the University of Pennsylvania in communications, and I'm still here.

(Soundbite of laughter)

MARTIN: You didn't know what had happened to these friends. Is that why you made the film, or why did you make this film?

Mr. MANDELBAUM: Well, what happened is that I was just doing a Google search of this old girlfriend from college, Patricia Dixon(ph), really without expecting to find anything, and then I saw her name on a list of people who had disappeared, and that to me was very shocking, and I went back to Argentina to find out if it was, in effect, her. It was. And I tracked down her sister, and that's how everything started.

And then I started - I thought well, there are other friends that I knew who had disappeared, not a large number, but what are their stories? You know, what really happened to them? And so I started making this film, which is really about, if you want my disappeared, but it's really about our disappeared because my feeling is that these thousands of people are part of a conscious of the whole country and that we still have a long ways to go to deal with this, you know, terrible tragedy that happened in Argentina.

MARTIN: Are they, though, part of the conscious of the whole country? Do you feel that there is a sense that there is a national will to be accountable for what happened to these young people?

Mr. MANDELBAUM: Well, it's very divided still. There are still people who think that what the military did is right. Those are the people that I really wish saw my film so that they see the enormous pain that was inflicted that so many people still live with to this day. You know, the children, like Ines, parents, siblings, friends; for whom, you know, this is a permanent presence.

MARTIN: I want to hear from Ines. Ines, Mini was your mother. Will you tell us what happened to her?

Ms. KUPERSCHMIT: The story, as been told to me, I don't remember. I was too young to remember. It was that Mini was in a park with some friends meeting their children and at some point she came to realize that there was someone coming for her. There was either a group of people or police or someone. And so, rather than put her, as well as myself, at risk, she actually walked towards the

military in order to deflect attention from me. And she left me in the grass at the park, hoping that luck would shine upon me that day and that I would be safer than actually getting detained along with her.

MARTIN: And it is a remarkable story of what happened, which it's almost, forgive me, unbearable to listen to - and particularly if you have children, you thinking about the sacrifice of this mother and what she did to protect you and the sense of faith and hope that she must have had that someone would come and rescue you. But can I ask you, when you were growing up, what did you think had happened to your parents? You were raised, right, by your aunt and uncle? What did they tell you?

Ms. KUPERSCHMIT: The earliest version of the story was, you know, your parents died in a car accident and so you came to the United States. But it didn't take long for me to realize that that wasn't the correct story and I was curious; I was perceptive. And then at some point, while I was still a child, I understood that they disappeared. I just didn't know how. Later, I came to know that they disappeared separately, that my father disappeared first and that my mother disappeared later. And then it wasn't until sometime later than that that I actually came to the U.S. with my great aunt and uncle.

MARTIN: If you're just joining us, this is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. We're speaking with filmmaker Juan Mandelbaum about his new documentary "Our Disappeared." It follows his return to Argentina to trace friends who disappeared during that country's infamous Dirty War. We're also taking to Ines Kuperschmit. Both of her parents disappeared during the dictatorship, something she found out only later in life.

This is a remarkable story. Now, just to condense it briefly, that your mother literally hid you in the bushes so that you would not be taken away with her. And you were found by tourists. And your mother had, because your father had previously disappeared, had put some identifying information in a tag around your neck. And these tourists first went to a police station not knowing what to do, and then refused to turn you over and eventually reunited with family members who raised you. And, as I said, it's a remarkable story and you can only think of the bravery and the fortitude of a number of people who participated in reuniting you with family. It's quite heartbreaking.

Mr. MANDELBAUM: And Michel, if I can...

MARTIN: Sure. Juan.

Mr. MANDELBAUM: If I can add - over 500 children were actually taken or born in captivity that were then given away for adoption to military families who couldn't have children. So this could've easily been Ines' fate, you know, if Mini hadn't left her there.

MARTIN: Ines, you wanted to say something?

Ms. KUPERSCHMIT: Yeah. No, I was just thinking when I became a mother; I think that it became all the more real to me how difficult that sacrifice must have been - that my mom made. I remember when Laurence returned, you know, eight months and nine months, and it was right around that age where I would've been when I was left at the park, and I would just look at him and think how did she do it? What amazing strength, really, because I just couldn't imagine doing it.

MARTIN: Ines, I want to play a clip now of your father's cousin, Mercedes(ph). She was a fellow dissident activist along with your parents. She's talking about the circumstances under which she left the country for a neighboring Uruguay and she's interviewed in Spanish. We are translating. But I want to emphasize this because this is an example of the kinds of decisions that people were making on a day to day basis and trying to cope with the repression. Here it is.

(Soundbite of documentary, "Our Disappeared.")

MERCEDES (Spanish spoken) (Through Translator): I went around with cyanide pills. In fact, when I left the country, I had two cyanide pills. I left from the airport from Montevideo, Uruguay with my mother, poor thing. And I had fake document and the plane was about to take off, and then the plane turns around and heads back into the airport. And I said to my poor mom, look mommy, if now they open the door, all I ask you is that you protect me and let me kill myself with the pills. You know they can't take me alive.

MARTIN: Juan, Argentina's now a democracy and, you know, it still has its issues, but a democracy nonetheless. And what I wanted to ask you is what do you think the legacy of this relatively recent history - what effect do you think it has on the country today?

Mr. MANDELBAUM: Well, Argentina's become a much more violent country than it ever was, even with our military coups and everything; that's one of the legacies. And, at the same time and sort of at the national level, the fact that practically all of the perpetrators have not been brought to justice. Even though they were covered by amnesty laws for a long time and those laws were

revoked, the backlog is so huge and justice is so slow. And I think that when you go through the process of bringing these perpetrators to justice, you also educate the country, on a continuing basis, of the horrors.

MARTIN: Do you see - I think this film will resonant with many people in part because of things going on elsewhere in the world now.

Mr. MANDELBAUM: Yes.

MARTIN: For example in Iran...

Mr. MANDELBAUM: Yes.

MARTIN: ...where many people see young people trying to assert themselves and demand more freedom from their government, and I'm wondering does the society ever recover? Does it really heal itself?

Mr. MANDELBAUM: I think the shadow of the disappeared is still covering our country in many ways.

MARTIN: Ines?

Ms. KUPERSCHMIT: You know, the saying from the movie, life always beats death is very true, but how does one live that life? I mean for some youths they become very radicalized, they become very angry and potentially can become more violent. You know, for me, I'd like to think I carry on the same ideals but just in a peaceful way. But that kind of repression, whether we're talking about Argentina, the Middle East, the U.S., wherever we are; it can have dangerous consequences and it can really grow in terms of magnitude beyond what the parents experienced.

MARTIN: Ines Kuperschmit joined us from the University of California, Los Angeles; and filmmaker Juan Mandelbaum's new "Nuestros Desaparecidos/"Our Disappeared" premiered this week on PBS. It's part of the Independent Lens series. You want to check your local listings for exact air times and we'll have links on our Web site, and he joined us from WGBH in Boston.

Thank you both so much for speaking with us.

Ms. KUPERSCHMIT: Thank you for your interest.

Mr. MANDELBAUM: Thank you so much.

(Soundbite of music)

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