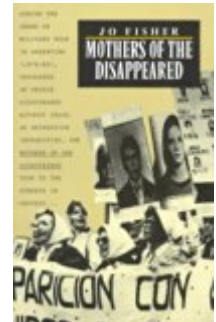


Jo Fisher. *Mothers of the Disappeared.* Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1995. xiv + 168 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-89608-371-4.



Reviewed by Virginia W. Leonard

Published on H-LatAm (June, 1996)

The purpose of this book "is to give a voice to the Madres de Plaza de Mayo," the mothers and grandmothers of thousands of Argentines who vanished from 1975 to 1983. Josephine Fisher bases this book on interviews with over forty mothers and grandmothers conducted between May and December 1985 and March and June 1987 in Argentina. The eight chapters are chronological and highlight events that the Mothers found crucial. The book, which was written in 1988, ends with the Mothers explaining why they continue to march every Thursday in the Plaza de Mayo.

The Introduction summarizes the history of Argentina since 1950 as one of economic decline, political instability, and military intervention. In spite of the phenomenon of Evita Peron, Argentine women remained subordinate to men and faced economic exploitation. Their political participation increased after they gained the right to vote (1947) and were encouraged by the Peronists to run for office. After 1955, political activities were curbed for both men and women, and women joined with men in union strikes, student

protests, church groups, and small guerrilla movements. However, the women who joined the Mothers tended to be apolitical, traditional women who had kept to the home. They became politicized after their children disappeared, along with 30,000 other people (p. 10), and nobody could, or would, help them.

Chapter 1, "The Kidnappings," contains the testimony of the Mothers on how they learned their children and grandchildren—who could be anywhere from the unborn to 40 years old—had been kidnapped. Almost all kidnappings were violent and carried out by the security forces in disguise at night, when there would be few witnesses. Houses were left vandalized, and goods were stolen, including cars. If small children were present, they were often taken, too. Declaring a state of siege, the military gave itself a legal basis for suspension of habeas corpus and use of the death penalty. Institutions such as the judiciary, the Roman Catholic Church, Jewish organizations, and the press were intimidated or hampered by decrees. They were slow to protest any censorship. The English-language newspaper *Buenos*

Aires Herald was the one exception and spoke out against the disappearances.

Chapter 2, "The Mothers," describes how they found themselves alone, terrorized, and powerless, going in search of their children. Even their relatives and friends accepted the official explanation that those who were arrested must have been terrorists. Often their husbands insisted that they cease their search and stay at home. As they stood in line in military headquarters, courts, prisons, and police stations asking where their children were they began to run into other mothers. Soon they began to compare notes and realize that the kidnappings were systematic.

Chapter 3, "Las Locas de Plaza de Mayo" (The Madwomen of Plaza de Mayo), speaks of the desperation of the mothers. They went to human rights centers such as the Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS) and the Families of the Disappeared (Desaparecidos) and Political Prisoners and found they were powerless. Those organizations counseled moderation so that the mothers would not lose more children in retaliation for their continuing search. In wrenching and agonizing terms, nine mothers describe their personal evolution from traditional thinking and roles to those of brave and courageous protesters. For it was these women who were the first to dare to mount a public demonstration in defiance of military order.

The women began to go in groups from one place to another inquiring after the whereabouts of their sons and daughters, and in some cases, after missing husbands. They became more desperate when some acquaintances or released prisoners began to report torture and killings. (In the early days, a few mothers had been told where their children were and had seen them in prison.) After a year of futility they decided to meet on April 30, 1977, in the Plaza de Mayo in front of the Government House, which also held the office of the Ministry of the Interior, which was responsible for all questions about disappeared persons.

Subsequently it was decided to march every Thursday at 3:30 p.m. The late Azucena Villaflor de Vicenti had suggested that they wear head scarves by which to recognize each other when they went on the annual pilgrimage to Lujan. Finding that these attracted attention, they decided to wear them with an embroidered demand "Aparicion con Vida" (Reappearance with Life) "because we were no longer searching for just one child but for all the disappeared" (Suarez, p. 54).

Chapter 4, "International Solidarity," continues exploring the personal transformation of each of the Mothers by selecting eleven who are representative of the provinces, Roman Catholic and Jewish homes, working-class and middle-class backgrounds. Although the Mothers faced danger, threats, and hostility from relatives and others, they struggled on, finding strength in their group and drawing support from each other. They now perceived themselves as fighting for all who had disappeared.

As domestic repression intensified, they found unexpected support from outsiders, beginning with the Jimmy Carter administration's blocking aid and loans for violations of human rights. The World Cup for Soccer that was held in Argentina in 1978 brought many in the foreign press to Buenos Aires. Members of the Dutch soccer team came down to the Plaza with carnations for the Mothers, and Dutch television reported on the Mothers. The Mothers also collected money to finance the trips of some of their members abroad to visit the U.S. State Department, the United Nations, the President of Italy, and the Pope. (They decided not to return to the United States because of U.S. involvement in Nicaragua [p.86].) They wrote letters abroad in different languages. The Organization of American States (OAS) sent its Commission on Human Rights in September 1979, and the Mothers lined up to testify while Argentine youth hurled insults at them. Money began to arrive from Europe and the United States, and support came from the Argentine exile communi-

ties. Two million Argentines had left after the military coup against Isabel Peron in 1976 (p. 85).

Chapter 5, "The Association," recounts the formal registration of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo as a Civil Association in August 1979. The police and military had erected barricades to keep them from demonstrating on Thursdays during most of that year. Undeterred, they continued to meet, published a bulletin, and used a check for \$25,000 from the women of Holland to buy an office that they named their "House." Slowly mothers in the provinces heard about them and established affiliates. They also reached out to other organizations for support; surprisingly, they got none from the CGT (confederation of labor unions), even though 54 percent of the disappeared persons were from the working class. The Communist Party and the Soviet Union supported the military because the Soviet Union needed Argentine grains (pp. 80, 99). On New Year's Day 1980 the Mothers returned to the Plaza to march, catching the police off guard. In spite of detentions, beatings, and threats, they continued to march every Thursday, inviting foreign journalists to observe.

Chapter 6, "The Fall of the Military Government," traces the growing economic crisis in Argentina, the revival of political activity, and the reconstitution of the CGT by the Peronists. Until 1981, neither the parties, CGT, nor Roman Catholic Church publicly addressed the issue of disappeared persons (p. 111). The Mothers kept insisting that this issue be addressed. In 1982 the Grandmothers of missing children, many of whom were adopted out to childless police and military couples in Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, became more visible. They held up placards with photographs of those small children as proof that not only adults disappeared.

The military declared war on England and fought over possession of the Falklands/Malvinas Islands. The Mothers, almost alone, declared that this was a diversion and that news of Argentine

victories were lies. Argentines accused them of being unpatriotic and then apologized when they discovered they were right. Unfortunately, the politicians did not pressure the military out of power after their decisive defeat, but gave them time to regroup (p. 117) and cover up evidence of their misdeeds. Elections were held in mid-1983, and Raul Alfonsin of the Radicals won, the first time the Peronists ever lost a free election. As a group, the Mothers remained neutral and fought against the military's self-declared amnesty law. On the last Thursday of military rule, 30,000 persons joined the Mothers in the Plaza de Mayo.

Chapter 7, "Democracy," examines why restoration of constitutional rule did not resolve the problems faced by the Mothers. Instead, the military and police escaped justice—only nine heads of three juntas were tried, and the three heads of the last one were acquitted. Torturers and murderers who followed orders under the doctrine of "obediencia debida" were let go. Argentines watched their television screens in horror as thousands of secret graves were exhumed and a team of DNA experts arrived from the United States to identify the bodies. Grandmothers began their search for the 208 to 400 missing grandchildren, and not one of the kidnappers was punished (Interview with Carlotto by Fisher, p. 135). In 1984, kidnappings, threats, and bomb attacks continued even as the civilian government tried to persuade the security forces to dismantle their repressive apparatus (p. 139). In December 1986, Alfonsin signed an act that set a time limit on new prosecutions of military officers, and as the courts rushed to handle these cases, rebellions led by mid-level officers caused the Alfonsin administration to end all prosecutions of officers on active service (p. 146).

Chapter 8, "The Future," ends on a somber note as the Mothers and Grandmothers find little justice in a democratic Argentina. They have lost faith political parties, the courts and judges, the Roman Catholic Church, and the political process.

What is uplifting is the transformation of the Mothers into caring human beings who became concerned for the human rights of all Argentines. They have gotten a baptism by fire, and many speak of their roles as women and mothers outside of the home. They do not see themselves as feminists, because they think the term negates their roles as wives and mothers. They see themselves as the only opposition to the government, and they "have to work together with men to change this society" (Interview with Bonafini by Fisher, p. 158). This is why they continued to march in 1988.

The book should have been updated. The reader is left hanging--are the Mothers still marching? Are they still concerned with building democracy in Argentina? In addition, the Preface gives an overview of the book with mismatched chapter numbers, which should have been caught by the time of its second printing.

Jo Fisher's historical and political analysis mixed with the testimony of the Mothers is well done. They have successfully carried the role of motherhood into the political arena and maintained its idealization. They are still struggling with harassment, poverty, patriarchy, and intolerance. They are growing old and conscious that their movement might die with them. One can only hope that their association will be able to broaden its appeal to younger generations and to men and women who did not lose family members.

This book is recommended for Latin American and women's history, political science, and sociology classes. It is a good example of testimonial literature, and of a grassroots women's movement in the making. These women are building self-esteem and developing a political awareness. By 1987 they have become advocates of wage equity and gender issues although they do not consider themselves feminists. Equality in the home was not an issue. Democratization of Argentine life is

proceeding slowly; these women exemplify that process individually and as members of a group.

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Citation: Virginia W. Leonard. Review of Fisher, Jo. *Mothers of the Disappeared*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. June, 1996.

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