Building the Testimonial Archive of the *Operativo Independencia* and the Military Dictatorship in Famaillá (Tucumán, Argentina): A Critical Review

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This article is a critical review of the experience of building a Testimonial Archive of the Operation Independence and the military dictatorship in Famaillá (Tucumán, Argentina). The Archive was created by the Research Group Concerning the Genocide in Tucumán (GIGET). Our article is a theoretical-methodological reflection on our own practices in light of the specific aspects of working with genocide victims of the working classes. Our analysis begins with a description of the group of interviewees; this is a central element in our account of the difficulties as well as the potential of the completed work. Since the building of the archive also included the making creation of interviews, this review addresses aspects related to the production of oral sources.

This paper is a critical review of the production of oral sources and the experience of building the *Testimonial Archive about the Operation Independence and the Military Dictatorship in Famaillá (Tucumán, Argentina)* which was undertaken by the Research Group Concerning the Genocide in Tucumán (GIGET).[1]

The municipality (department) of Famaillá, south of the province of Tucumán, has found its place in "Argentinean History" as the headquarters of the first Clandestine Detention Centre (CCD) of the country. The CCD has a complex history. First, the existence of a CCD assumes the operation of a systematic plan of forced disappearances of persons. The concentration camp constitutes a specific device of this method and does not exist, as such, outside of it. Furthermore, the Little School of Famaillá acted as the head of the first circuit of CCD in Argentina. Associated with it, at least eight other clandestine spaces of reclusion worked in the province.[2]

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[1] GIGET is an independent, interdisciplinary working group founded in 2005. It currently consists of Margarita Cruz, a socialpPsychologist and founding member of the Association of Ex Detainees-Missing; Ana Sofía Jemio, a sociologist at Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA)/CONICET; Ezequiel Monteros, an actor and visual artist; and Alejandra Pisani, a sociologist at UBA/ CONICET. It has the support of the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights (MEDH) and the Association of Ex Detainees-Missing.

[2] We refer to the clandestine detention spaces of Chimenea de Caspinchango, former mill Lules, former mill Santa Lucía, Famaillá police station, Monteros police station; tenements of Fronterita

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Ex CCD Little School of Famaillá / photo: G. Botrugno Ex CCD Tenement of Ingenio Fronterita/ photo: G. Botrugno

If one takes into account that this circuit began in February of 1975, the second implication is that, in Argentina, the genocide started a year before the last military dictatorship, during a constitutional government. Its starting point was the *Operativo Independencia*, launched through Secret Decree Nr. 261 of February 5, 1975 and signed by the constitutional president Isabel Martínez de Perón, in general agreement with the ministers. The official document ordered and sanctioned the carrying out of military operations, of civic and psychological actions, "in order to neutralize and/or annihilate the actions of the subversive elements" in Tucumán. Through this decree, the repressive forces of the State led by the Army and endorsed by much of the political, economic, and ecclesiastical and guild leaders, launched a systematic plan of annihilation aimed at producing a deep transformation in these social groups.[3]

Since 1975, the Army unfurled a true "warfare scenario" in Famaillá: it installed at least ten military devices; it established a strict control of the flow of people and merchandise in the area and took over direct and indirect control of the main government and civilian organizations of the department.[4] Once the coup

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(on the private property of Ingenio Fronterita), Lavalle School, and the Central Police Station of the province. In all of those places peoplewere illegally detained and tortured but not all of them operated with the same strategies of a CCD, therefore the term clandestine spaces of reclusion is used.

[3] The research about the repressive system in the province shows, until now, a total of 802 cases of forced disappearances and murders between 1975 and 1983, of which 35% are from the period of Independence Operation (Date updated on 14-01-2011, given by Inés Izaguirre, director of the research "El genocidio en Argentina", Subsidy UBACYT S017, S034, S136, SO 68. Subsidy CONICET PIP 1998 Nº 1075).

[4] For an analysis regarding the characteristics of the intervention of the Army during the Independence Operation Famaillá, see Cruz, M.; Jemio, A. S.; Monteros, E. y Pisani, A. (2010). "Las prácticas sociales genocidas en el Operativo Independencia en Famaillá, Tucumán. Febrero de 1975 - Marzo de 1976". En Actas de las Primeras Jornadas de Historia Reciente del NOA

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d'état took place in March of 1976, the Little School of Famaillá was closed and the former mill Nueva Baviera, also located in Famaillá, served as the main military base of the South of Tucumán.

At the beginning of the 1980s, a small group of people in the area contacted human rights organizations that worked in the capital of the province. Through them, some claims were made before the National Committee of the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), most of which were for cases of forced disappearances.[5]

After this initiative, which did not last long and included only a few families, a strong veil of silence fell upon the population. This silence was framed in a post-dictatorial context marked by impunity. The emergence and consolidation of a provincial political force led by the repressor Antonio D. Bussi[6] and the daily living of the people with former members of the repressive forces constitute central elements at the time of reflecting about the persistence of fear which amounted to silence.

In 2005, when we started our work from the GIGET, the sociopolitical context had changed. Bussism was in crisis, the impunity laws had been annulled,[7] and many survivors had started claims in order to obtain financial reparations as provided for in the Law 24.043.[8]

From the beginning, our research was oriented toward the depiction of the genocidal nature of the repressive practices that unfolded in Tucumán during the *Operativo Independencia* and the military dictatorship, and to analyze the current forms of memory about that process among the working classes.[9] In order to achieve these objectives, we established selection criteria

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"Memoria, Fuentes Orales y Ciencias Sociales". Tucumán: Asociación de Historia Oral del Noroeste Argentino, Universidad Nacional de Tucumán.

[5] Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, CONADEP, *Nunca más*, Eudeba, Buenos Aires, 1984.

[6] Antonio Domingo Bussi led the Independence Operation from December 1975 and was a *de facto* governor of the province between 1976 and 1977. When democracy came back in 1983 he was prosecuted for crimes against humanity but went unpunished due to the Law of Punto Final of 1986. In 2010 he was convicted for the disappearance of the former provincial senator Guillermo Vargas Aignasse. He died in November of 2011 while in house arrest.

[7] This is the name given to the laws of Punto Final (1986) and Obediencia Debida (1987) that closed off the possibility of sentencing those responsible for the genocide. In 2004, the prosecutions were reopened after the annulment of those laws.

[8] This law provides compensation to people who were detained through order of the National Executive Power or through an order issued by the military courts between November 6, 1974, the day on which a state of siege was declared, and December 10, 1983.

[9] Our main lines of work have been, until now: a) to analyze the specific characteristics assumed by the strategy of power deployed by the army in Famaillá during the Operation Independence and the last military dictatorship; b) to make a survey of the military

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for interviewees that extended beyond survivors and included relatives, witnesses, and all those persons who lived in Famaillá during the *Operativo Independencia*.

Our way of working consists of three levels: research, as a scientific practice that aims to generate knowledge; participation, understood as the involvement of the subjects studied in the process of the research; and education, as a way of promoting the construction of a collective knowledge through work with popular educational methodologies.[10]

There are two main axes running through this research project: a discussion of the research results in the community through workshops, seminars, and activities that promote acts of memory, such as tribute acts as homages to fighters of the area and marches in important dates. In that sense, our work is not reduced to analyzing the emerging forms of memory about the genocide process but also attempts to actively intervene on them through the collective construction of knowledge.

In this framework, we decided to build a testimonial archive as a means of preserving the oral history and socializing or popularizing it through its dissemination in the public space. The archive is the result of a long work process. In the following, we will go through the various stages of this process and propose some theoretical-methodological reflections on the specific aspects involved in working with traumatic experiences in the working classes.

1. Producing Oral Sources

The interviews, as a specific element of oral history, can be viewed from two perspectives: as a finished object and as a process. The interview-object constitutes the immediately "tangible," materialized as a written, sound or audiovisual registry of the narrative of a particular subject. The interview-process involves a series of situations and sequences and its final result is that object.

In oral history there is a systematic concern for denaturalizing the interview-object and viewing the different phases of the process in order to demonstrate that the interview constitutes an event with its own history. The

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institutions that worked in the area and to describe the function of the repressive circuit in which they were integrated; and c) to analyze the construction of meaning and the social descriptions of the inhabitants of Famaillá about the Independence Operation and the last military dictatorship.

[10] María Teresa Sirvent, *Cultura Popular y Participación Social. Una investigación en el barrio de Mataderos. Editorial Miño y Davila* (Madrid, España, 1999)

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trajectories, wishes, and needs of the interacting subjects (interviewer and narrator), the ideas and prejudices that have been formed between one another, the socio-political context in which the meetings takes place, and the characteristics of the research in which it is framed are some of the elements that play a part at the time of the making of an interview, setting the dialogical frame.

1.1. The First Contacts

As part of the design of the interview as a process, the following aspects had to factor into our analysis: the identification of the prejudices with which we approached work, the expectations that the interviewees had of our work, and the way the first contacts in the area were established.

Contrary to the views raised by optimists, the approach to a new field of knowledge is never made with "an empty mind"; the previous ideas (not just in the cognitive order but also in the emotional one) constitute an ever effective and operational reality. These preconceptions, just like the expectations and desires of our informers, are factors that necessarily influence our work.

The point, then, is not to try to get rid of them but to acknowledge their existence and to ask: What position do we assume vis-à-vis the expectations that interviewees have of us? How rigid or flexible do we have to be in order to modify our expectations and prejudices within the reality we are facing? How do we assimilate and signify the situations that contradict our own previous ideas? To which degree do these ideas serve as obstacles to read certain situations and act accordingly?

1.1.a. Our Previous Ideas, Expectations, and Prejudices

The first trip to Famaillá took place in August of 2005. We had worked for six months defining the project that would guide our work. The bibliography about that time and that area was scarce; therefore our knowledge about *Operativo Independencia* was limited. Thus, the prejudices that usually exist at the start of any research took a more relevant place in our interpretive frameworks.

In the first place, we started from an underestimation of the dimensions that the repressive system had in the area. There were very few claims from the survivors of Famaillá in the official agencies and only three out of ten illegal reclusion places that we had registered at the time had been

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recognized.[11] Therefore, we thought it would be difficult to find survivors in the area.

Secondly, we assumed that people were not going to be readily willing to speak about their experiences and express their opinions about what happened during the genocide. The post-dictatorial context of the province was marked by the presence of broad sectors of society that openly justified the dictatorship and *Operativo Independencia*. This expressed itself in the election of the repressor Antonio Domingo Bussi as a provincial governor in 1995. If it is true that at the moment we started our work the socio-political context had changed, it was possible to think that the persistence of fear and the social stigma of the victims and their surroundings could serve as obstacles for the making of the interviews.

Lastly, we began from a certain idea of "must be" of the speech of the genocide victims, based in the way that they assumed the tales we knew up to that point. In general, the testimonies that have acquired more social visibility are of militants or activists in human rights organizations. Their stories, even when they refer to their own experience, are the result of a collective development and share certain features such as the vindication of militants of the disappeared and the survivors, and terror as a part of a broader project led by the ruling class.

These first ideas strongly clashed with the experience during the first stages of our fieldwork. Most of the people we contacted were willing to provide their testimony and many of them were survivors. This predisposition acquires more relevance if one takes into consideration that we were total strangers to them and we did not have the support of any local institution; that the interview was not a habitual practice for any of them; and that in many cases it was the first time they told their experiences outside of their intimate circle.

Their narratives were not suitable to our expectations about what the narratives of the victims "must be." The majority of the tales were strongly anchored in the horror, establishing a diffuse chronology of the "before, during, and after" of the genocide and attributed a total irrationality to the actions of the military.[12]

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[11] We are referring to the Informe de la Comisión Bicameral Investigadora de las violaciones a los Derechos Humanos en la provincia de Tucumán y al informe Nunca Más, elaborado por la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP): Comisión Bicameral de la provincia de Tucumán, *Informe de la Comisión Bicameral Investigadora de las violaciones a los Derechos Humanos en la provincia de Tucumán,* Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, San Miguel de Tucumán, 1991.

[12] These stories changed over time. We believe that the development of collective instances of reflection contributed in this modification. For an in-depth analysis of the survivors`narratives, see

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In many cases, recounting the experiences was experienced as a break with a period of silence. This was translated into a feeling of relief at the end of the interview. This was expressed through changes in their countenance and body language, and even, in some cases, through metaphors of "removing a backpack" or "taking a dagger out of one's throat."

All of these aspects strongly influenced the research process. Listening proved to be more complex than we had expected. The information that we gathered during the first interviews led us to reevaluate the magnitude of the repressive apparatus. Not only many relatives and survivors but most of the persons that we talked to had a more or less direct contact with the repressive system.[13] Also, the narratives of our interviewees lacked the calming effect resulting from the possibility of restricting the terror in the past.

These issues had a destructuring effect on us that kept us from keeping the instrumental distance necessary to practice analytic listening. Paraphrasing A. Portelli, we had to go through our first disillusion in front of the idealized survivor.[14] This meant recognizing that there is no such thing as a direct equation between being a victim of terror, despise the way the repressive forces acted, and understand the political project that is inscribed in genocide. The fact of finding ourselves in front of relatives of disappeared people who had voted for Bussi; survivors who vindicated the figure of the chief of *Operativo Independencia* or those who considered the actions of the military as beneficial because otherwise "communism would have won" were all signs that pointed toward the need of understanding and meeting the victims instead of looking for the abstract survivors that we had in mind. To go forward in the understanding of the logic of terror, the construction of meaning in the narratives of the interviewees and coping mechanisms put into play allowed us to understand (and tolerate) the strong contradictions that appeared inside of the accounts of the victims.

Ana Sofía Jemio and Alejandra Pisani, "Las formas de narración, representación y explicación del proceso genocida en Tucumán: las construcciones de sentido en los discursos de los sobrevivientes de Famaillá," en CD Primeras Jornadas de Historia Reciente del NOA. Memoria, Fuentes Orales y Ciencias Sociales, Asociación de Historia Oral del Noroeste Argentino (AHONA), Tucumán, julio de 2010.

[13] In this regard, it is meaningful that all of the interviewees said they found out about the existence of Clandestine Detention Centres and the practices of kidnapping or forced disappearance of people at the same moment the Operation Independence was taking place.

[14] Alessandro Portelli, "Una historia (y celebración) del *Circolo Gianni Bossio*", en Gerardo Necoechea García y Pablo Pozzi: *Cuéntame cómo fue. Introducción a la historia oral*, Imago Mundi, Buenos Aires, 2008, p. 19.

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1.1.b. The Expectations of the Interviewees

The great predisposition to offer testimonies that we found in the population of Famaillá is inscribed in a historical context that saw the decline of Bossism as a political force in the province, the annulment of the impunity laws, and the claims for financial reparations.

These factors were conjugated in a complex manner to forward the discourse of what happened during the genocide. However, the existence of a new social context that eased the spoken word does not necessarily assume that the spoken word can be enunciated. Discourse also requires an interlocutor willing to listen.[15]

Contrary to what happens in big urban centers, and even in some locales in inland Tucumán, in Famaillá there were no organizations linked to the defense of human rights. The State hadn't developed a policy of surveys of cases of kidnapping and disappearances in the area. These absences were more meaningful due to the physical and symbolical distances that separated most of the Famailleans from the provincial capital.

As a consequence of this situation there was a notorious lack of information regarding the rights that aid the victims of genocide and of the official organizations that they could go to in order to enforce these rights.[16] Indeed, most of the survivors we interviewed had never testified about their kidnapping before any official organization.

These factors influenced our presence as a source of a range of expectations linked to the possibility of accessing the financial reparations, obtaining information on how to make claims, and inquiring about the status of the paperwork given to the *Secretaría de Derechos Humanos* (Secreatariat for Human Rights). Also, the absence of the State in the guarantee of basic social and financial rights (health, education, housing), in addition to the precariousness of the living conditions of most of the inhabitants of the area, associated the interview with issues as diverse as

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[15] Survivors of several genocides have pointed out that they are carriers of a story about a horror that society is not willing to listen to. The building of certain social structures has been, in our country, the result of the fight started by several human rights organizations that have raised their voices again and again. Organizing has been the condition for the possibility of that fight.

[16] A significant example of that lack of information is that between 2004 and 2005 many of the interviewees were defrauded by a lawyer that charged honorariums in order to transact the financial reparations to the survivors referred to in the Law 24.043 and did not even show the necessary documents to start the corresponding dossiers. It should be noted that the paperwork can be done without legal representation and at no cost in the Secretaría de Derechos Humanos.

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the possibility of obtaining medication, employment, or contacts that could facilitate medical attention.

It was not easy to place ourselves vis-à-vis such expectations. The fact that our field of work required a level of involvement with the inhabitants that went beyond the moment of the interview only added to these difficulties. Being the recipients of a testimony that was silenced for so long gave us a "duty to listen" that affected our capacity of directing the research process, not allowing us to decide the time and the frequency of the interviews. In many cases, the decision of the number of interviews to conduct or the choice of interviewees were subject to the times and urgencies of our contacts in these places. This led, for example, to the making of six interviews in one day or to extend their length way beyond the advisable time, situations that clearly conspired against the quality of our work.

The fact that most of the survivors had never declared their kidnapping and that their stories contained very valuable information about ongoing judicial investigations strongly challenged us to action. This led toward, in many cases, not to be able to distinguish between the issues that effectively corresponded to the reach and possibilities of our work and those that we had to delegate to the appropriate agencies. As a result of a complex process of group development we were able to recognize those obstacles, set the limits of our work, and retake the direction of the process.

Even if it was frustrating in many aspects, it was a key element for being able to keep on working in the area.

In practice this was reflected in a series of concrete actions. Recognizing that our work could not and should not fill the absence of the State led us to establish institutional contacts so that a group of the Secretaría de Derechos Humanos de la Nación could visit Famaillá to take the statements of the survivors. We decided not to stay in Famaillá during the fieldwork period because remaining in the area would not allow us to establish the moments of activity and rest and establish an emotional distance with work. We also enabled a space of group reflection with the company of members of the Argentinian Team of Psychosocial Research and Work (EATIP) which allowed us to sort out the obstacles that arose during the work and its repercussion within the group.

1.1.c. Introductions

Frequently it has been pointed out how important first contacts and introductions are in the development of the interview. A sincere and respectful attitude and a clear explanation of the objectives and reach of the work by the researcher are key facts to achieve a relationship of trust with

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the interviewee.[17] In practice, the lack of experience and the urgency of the work made us underestimate those facts many times. The first contact with the interviewees was, generally, through key informants. Since most of the interviewees were friends, relatives`, or neighbors of other contacts, once we got there they already had some information on who we were and what we did. This led us, wrongly, to take for granted that they knew the objectives and reach of our work. In other words, we delegated the introductions to our key informants and assumed the existence of a sort of "transferable trust" among the interviewees.

Besides this, on many occasions when we combined activities with other organizations, people did not understand the differences between the objectives of our group and of those with whom we worked. Most of the interviewees did not have any previous contact with the institutions linked to human rights defense; for this reason it was logical that in the first place it would be difficult to gather enough information in order to identify them clearly. We all were part of the generic field of human rights.

This disarray was overcome over time when the presence of these organizations became more regular in the area and we put more emphasis on clearly stating our institutional affiliation and the independence of our work in regard to the State.

This last issue was linked, most of all, with the strong demand for financial reparations.[18] However, this did not entirely dissipate the interviewee's expectations that the interview could contribute to speeding up the reparation paperwork.

On this topic, we believe that the difficulties to clearly establish who we are and the reach of our work did not solely rely on the clarity of the introductions but also on the meaning the interviewees gave to our presence. The fact that we came from Buenos Aires or our link to the "theme" of human rights positioned us as bearers of certain contact networks that were more important to them than our specific institutional affiliation.

Up to that point, the only way we found in order to deal with those difficulties was to repeat the information over and over. Identifying specific objectives of the group implies assimilating a group of data that not only has to deal with our work but also the general context in which it is developed.

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[17] Marcos F. Freire Montyzuma, "Um encontro com as fontes em História Oral", en *Estudos Ibero-Americanos. PUCRS*, v. XXXII, n. 1 (junio 2006): p. 117-125.

[18] The great expectations around financial reparations led us to place special emphasis in clarifying that the interviews did not have an official capacity. It was essential to be as clear as possible in this topic, since any misunderstanding of false expectation could seriously affect our work, since they were very sensible topics due to the serious deficiencies that many of the interviewees live in.

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Therefore, even if the content of the information is the same, the meaning that is inscribed in it is different each time.

With the same objective in mind we have used written communication tools in order to spread specific information or to strengthen those made verbally. We worked in order to achieve enjoyable designs and the plainest possible language. This strategy proved to be effective both in a communicational and affectionate level. It allowed the interviewee to review the information in case they had any doubts and to diminish the distortions that can be produced through "word of mouth" transmission. Also, giving them a personalized invitation or a flyer is experienced by them as an act of recognition.

Taller de presentación del proyecto

"Archivo Testimonial y Documental sobre el Operativo Independencia y la dictadura militar (1975-1983) en Famaillá"

Memoria, Verdad y Justicia

Miercoles 20 de octubre de 2010, 18:00 hs
Casa de la Cultura de Famaillá

Grupo de Investigación sobre el Genocidio en Tucuman
GIGET

De qué se trata el proyecto?

El proyecto "Archivo Testimonial y Documental sobre el Operativo Independencia y la dictadura militar (1975-1983) en Famaillá (Tucumán - Argentina)" se propone realizar un **archivo audiovisual** con testimonios de los pobladores de Famaillá sobre lo que sucedió en el pueblo durante el Operativo Independencia y la dictadura militar.
Además se hará una **película documental** contando la historia del pueblo en estos años.

Quién lo organiza?

El proyecto esta organizado por el **Grupo de Investigación sobre el Genocidio en Tucumán (GIGET)**, un equipo de trabajo independiente que realiza una investigación en Famaillá sobre las características y consecuencias que tuvo el genocidio desarrollado durante el Operativo Independencia y la última dictadura militar. Cuenta con el aval de la Asociación de ex Detenidos Desaparecidos (AEDD); el Movimiento Ecuménico por los Derechos Humanos (MEDH) y el Comité para la Defensa de la Salud, la Ética y los Derechos Humanos (CODESEDH)
Para realizar este proyecto contamos con el **apoyo de la ONG holandesa SEPHIS y del Programa de Historia Oral de la Universidad de Buenos Aires.**

Qué es un archivo testimonial?

Un archivo es un conjunto de documentos ordenados que se guardan, ordenan y conservan en un espacio físico.
Los archivos históricos son **una forma de preservar la memoria individual y colectiva sobre hechos del pasado**. Los documentos que se guardan en un archivo pueden ser de diferentes tipos. Por ejemplo, cartas, folletos, fotografías, boletines oficiales, etc.
Los archivos testimoniales son un tipo de archivo histórico que guarda los relatos de personas que han sido protagonistas o testigos de la historia. Por eso podemos decir que estos relatos constituyen la memoria viviente de una comunidad.
El archivo que queremos armar es un archivo testimonial que **busca preservar los relatos de los pobladores de Famaillá** sobre lo que sucedió en este pueblo durante el Operativo Independencia y la última dictadura militar

Qué testimonios estarán en el archivo?

Como parte del trabajo realizado en Famaillá, el GIGET ha filmado distintas entrevistas con sobrevivientes y testigos del genocidio.
En este tiempo, preguntaremos a cada uno de los compañeros que brindaron su testimonio si desea que su relato forme parte del archivo. **En el archivo sólo se incluirán los testimonios de las personas que den su autorización.**

En qué consiste la película documental?

La película documental se propone contar lo sucedido durante el Operativo Independencia en Famaillá a través de los relatos de sus pobladores para que otras personas conozcan la historia del pueblo.

Qué entrevistas se podrán incluir en la película documental?

Al igual que el Archivo, **el documental no incluirá ningún testimonio sin tener antes la autorización de la persona entrevistada.**

Es lo mismo la autorización para el Archivo que la autorización para el documental?

No. Si bien el Archivo y el documental son parte de un mismo proyecto, una misma persona puede autorizar que su testimonio sea incluido en el archivo y no en el documental, o al revés.

Para conversar sobre este tema los esperamos en la reunión!

Invitation flyer for the workshop of the presentation of the Testimonial Archive project

1.2. The Circumstances of the Interview

We understand as circumstances of the interview the physical and practical areas that are part of the environment of its production, the place where it is developed, its lengths, and the number of participants.[19]

When thinking about these issues, it is necessary to note that interviewer and interviewee do not necessarily share the same understanding as to what an interview should be. Each party has certain ideas about the roles they must assume, the topics that are relevant, and the formal guidelines that structure the meeting. The form that the interview takes is an

[19] Verena Alberti, *Manual de história oral* (Rio de Janeiro: Edita FGV, 2004), 106.

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expression or articulation of these views. Thus, conditions that appear as objective as time and space are crisscrossed by a number of subjective factors related to the sense that each party attributes to the interview.

1.2.a. Length of the Interview

Generally, the length of the interview is understood as the time needed for the discussion of the topic under investigation. While it is possible that the meeting extends beyond this period, the time for introduction and farewell is often restricted.

This type of time management relates to a conception of the interview that is different from the interviewees' understanding, for most of whom it was a social event: asides from the interviewers, we were their guests. This implied that the length of the meeting could be extended and the formal succession of the times of the interview had unclear limits.

Whenever we got to a home, after the formal introduction, the interviewees would invite us to drink *mate*, introduce us to their relatives, and told us general facts about their lives. In this sense, the interview *per se* was not marked by the start of a qualitatively different time and it was more like the continuation of a dialogue that started before. The same happened with its ending; the connection that was made was extended to general chats that many times included invitations to share a family dinner and offering their houses for lodgings during our stay.

The various expectations that the interviewees had of us may have predisposed these matters and the fact that the interview was experienced by them as a rare opportunity to talk about themselves and to be themselves.[20] But they also represent idiosyncrasies of the local culture and socialization.

That experience showed us the importance of respecting these times even if many times they did not coincide with the available time. In this sense, we understand that the moments before and after the interview are constitutive parts of the work. The narrative has repercussions and mobilizes the interviewee. Talking about their experiences during the genocide can be healing but also leaves the subject in a place of solitude with his or her anguish once the interview has ended.

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[20] Alessandro Portelli, "El uso de la entrevista en la historia oral", en Anuario Nº 20. *Historia, memoria y pasado reciente*, Homo Sapiens Ediciones - Escuela de Historia de la UNR, Rosario, 2005.

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Even if our work cannot and should not provide the needed but absent psychological help for victims, we believe that it is important to share the time after they have told their story, easing the tension.

Having enough flexibility to establish a balance of work times and needs of the interviewee played a fundamental role at the time of establishing a link of empathy and trust needed to achieve a good interview.

1.2.b. Place of the Interview

Methodology papers usually highlight the importance of establishing a comfortable, intimate, and quiet space in order to do the interview. In reality, it was difficult to follow those guidelines, not only because of the material conditions of the places in which we worked but also, and ultimately, because these requisites were not always compatible with the way of understanding and living spaces of the interviewees.

Usually, the interviews were made in interviewees' homes; we made this choice because of practical issues but also, because we believed that considering the type of topics and the idiosyncrasies of local culture, narrators were going to be more comfortable in their private lodgings.

The interviewees themselves were the ones who decided the place in their houses in which the interview was going to take place. Contrary to what we thought, almost none of them posed the need of establishing an intimate space at the time of giving their testimony.

We believe that the presence of relatives, neighbors, and children in the place and the fact that they did not turn off the television or the radio during the interview, show that the interviewees had a different idea from ours regarding the limits of the intimate and the sociable. In that sense, they did not have a need of establishing a material or symbolic separation between the space of the interview and the space of their daily life.

In our case, difficulties associated with this situation were, for the most part, inevitable. We tried to minimize them by sharpening our attention and concentration during the interview in order to redirect the course of the story whenever it was needed and using technical resources in order to have a good sound recording. This required a major effort and the availability of financial resources, but we believe that it was an accurate decision that resulted in a feeling of trust and comfort that the interviewees would have found difficult to achieve in a foreign space.

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1.2.c. People Present at the Interview

Most of the methodological literature related to oral history highlights the importance of avoiding the presence of "foreign" persons to the interview. They point out that this presence can be an obstacle for the development of dialogue: the interviewee can be inhibited, avoid certain topics, or feel pressured to say certain things in front of others. Meanwhile, people who witness the interview might want to express their own points of view and create interruptions, distractions, and overlapping conversations, which creates recording and transcription problems.[21]

While it is true that the presence of others can have these drawbacks, the work experience has shown that it is not always desirable to avoid such situations. In many cases the intimacy of a face to face interview can be intimidating. Relatives or neighbors usually have a role of companionship for the interviewee, giving them the assurance at the time of talking in front of strangers. Besides, the agreement that is generally expressed before their remarks can serve as a way of legitimizing their words.

For this reason we decided to accept the presence of "foreign" people in the interview during the first meetings and develop strategies to minimize the associated problems. One of the main problems was to ask the question in a way in which the interviewee would be the main interlocutor and the rest of the persons would be commentators.

If the person we are going to interview creates a group situation it is for a certain reason or need. Hence, it is very important to respect the decision of the interviewees even if this results in difficulties of a practical nature. The possibility of a private interview to discuss sensitive issues that could not be discussed in the presence of others depends primarily on building a bond of trust that is not always possible to achieve in the first meetings.

1.3. The Direction of the Interview

Oral testimony is a historical source that results in a joint activity from the interviewer and the interviewee. It is a unique and unrepeatable document that does not answer one way to the intentions of any of the parts, and it is configured in the complex articulations between what the interviewee wants and is able to tell and what the interviewer wants and is able to ask. This

[21] Alberti, *Manual de história oral.*

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delivery assumes main roles with the interests, careers, world visions, expectations and desires of each of the participants.[22]

In previous sections we have analyzed multiple features that shape the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. In this section, we propose to analyze in which ways these elements act in the assignment and assumption of the roles during the specific time of the interview.

In oral history there are several ways of understanding the role of the researcher as a co-author of the interviewees. The interviewer can be a reference point for a "guided monologue" or an active interlocutor in a thoughtful conversation. The interviewer can ask questions that actively guide the story or can turn on the recorder and listen to what the interviewee wishes to say.[23]

Despite their differences, these principles agree in asserting that the role of the researcher in the direction of the dialogue is what differentiates the interview from a mere conversation. Even if the implemented strategies for exercising this role may change, it is always the interviewer who has to arrange the meeting, raise the topic of the interview, and choose the manner of his intervention, according to the options already mentioned, or, more frequently, the combination of some of them.

This does not mean that the interviewee has a passive position. The interviewee not only decides what to include or exclude from the narration but also gives valuable information, many times unknown by the researcher, that is not necessarily an answer to a question.[24]

It is all about having enough flexibility as to keep the role of direction of the process, and, at the same time, to allow space to what the other wants to tell by registering the parts of the story that were not taken into consideration and should be covered. This balance is not easy to achieve; in our case the main obstacles were related to the difficulty of processing the amount of horror that the testimonies bore.

This difficulty led us to relate to the interviewees, which kept us from keeping the cautious distance we needed in order to conduct the interview accordingly. In many cases, the heartbreaking nature of the stories led us to

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[22] Freire Montyzuma, "Um encontro; Portelli, "El uso de la entrevista "; Steven L. Adleson, Mario Camarena, y Hilda Ipaguirre, "Historia social y testimonios orales", en Gerardo Necoechea García y Pablo Pozzi, *Cuéntame cómo fue. Introducción a la historia Oral*, Imago Mundi, Buenos Aires, 2008.

[23] Graciela De Garay, "La entrevista de historia oral: ¿monólogo o conversación?", *Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa*, Vol. 1, Nº 1 (1999); consultado el 16 de agosto de 2011 en: http://redie.uabc.mx/vol1no1/contenido-garay.html; Alberti, *Manual de história oral;* Portelli, "El uso de la entrevista."

[24] Portelli, "El uso de la entrevista."

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literally go silent, unable to ask questions, redirect the story or, at the very least, propose a pause.

Relating to the interviewees also led us to wrongly assume their frameworks as our own, keeping us from asking questions outside of them. For example, before stories that were anchored in the process of repression, we did not ask about the social-cultural contexts before and after the genocide experience, which would have allowed us to contextualize and give a broader sense to the experience.

On the other hand, the fact that the majority of the interviewees shared the same explanation about the cause of the genocide led us to believe that each new interviewee would do the same. That way, we gave structure to our frame of listening, constructed questions belonging to that explanation, and became used to the possibility of the appearance of new meanings. Identifying ourselves with these testimonies also led us to add their taboos and to avoid certain relevant topics for the analysis under the assumption that they would create uncomfortable situations.

Another way in which our difficulty to place ourselves in distance to the amount of horror recounted in the stories was our assuming of an outsider perspective and distance from which we "monitored" the truthfulness or falseness of what the interviewees said, according to their proximity to the factual story. A meaningful example was our attitude to an anecdote that came up in many of the stories. It was the story of a hearing impaired person who was murdered by the military because the person did not answer to the command of "freeze." Regardless of its truthfulness, this story expresses an irrational, arbitrary decision of the power over life and death attributed to the actions of the troops. However, during the course of the interview, that story was underestimated by us and it prevented an in-depth analysis concerning those matters.

This attitude was also expressed in the idea that some of the interviewees "exaggerated" the dimensions and practices of the repressive system. Being conscious of the reaction that was described by the survivors – best summarized by the phrase "You don't want to hear us and if you hear us you won't believe us" – had a great impact on us.

Identifying ourselves with the interviewees and the role of "monitors" of their speech are seemingly opposite attitudes that are based on the same difficulty: to keep a certain thoughtful and critical posture vis-à-vis a tale of horror.

This difficulty could be thought of as an enactment during the interview about the effects of terror and its longevity. If this is so, then the problem lies in how to listen to the horror without reproducing its paralyzing effects. We believe that critical thinking is essential, because it

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will tell us to what degree our own practices respond to those effects or create them.

2. Constructing the Testimonial Archive

The Testimonial Archive of *Operativo Independencia* and the military dictatorship in Famaillá, Tucumán (1975-1983) includes 37 audiovisual interviews and its transcriptions in a digital library that allows retrieving the material according to diverse search criteria.

Most of the testimonies are from persons who currently reside in or around Famaillá; 23 survivors (11 of whom have relatives who are missing or have been freed), 12 relatives, and 10 witnesses.

As for careers, most of the testimonies come from subjects that were rural or factory workers during the '70s (approximately two thirds), followed by State employees and farmers. Currently, most of the interviewees work as county employees, are retired, have casual jobs, or are on a social plan. Most of them haven't finished high school.

Almost half of the interviewees mention their involvement in several political, social, or political-military organizations during the '60s and '70s.[25] Among them, the majority of the current residents of Famaillá were rank and file militants. The few interviews with militants who have acted in the area as middle to high leadership of their organizations are mostly persons who do not reside there anymore. These are the only ones who have been previously interviewed by other persons.

The interviews include accounts of the socio-political context of the 1960s and '70s; kidnappings and disappearances; practices displayed by the people's army; army strategies in the educational and factory areas; and daily life occurrences during *Operativo Independencia*. The stories also include certain statements and explanations of current events.

With a few exceptions, these stories do not provide a general analysis, but they approach these topics from the interviewee's personal experiences. These types of narrative allow a heterogenic and complex approach to those years of the lives of the persons and what they meant to them.

As previously mentioned, creating the archive was not part of the initial objectives of our work. Because of this, the interviews that are part of

[25] This does not necessarily mean that the rest of the interviewees were not militants at the time. Fear still permeates the stories and a strong stigma of political participation or of contacts with political-military organizations still lingers in the local memory. Experience has showed us that the approach to those topics require, in many cases, building a bond of trust.

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it were not made specifically for this reason, since they answer to the interests and objectives raised by the research.

Building the archive started, then, by choosing what should be included, its technical usage, and transcription, labeling, and indexing. This process was completed by establishing accessibility criteria and the archive selection and customization of software to organize and store the material.

2.1. Soliciting Permissions and Establishing Accessibility Criteria

An important part of building the archive was asking for the interviewee's authorization for the inclusion of their testimonies. These led to a series of practical difficulties associated with the task of having to contact all of the persons who gave their testimonies, and, most of all, it created a challenge when it came to thinking about the implications of hosting the interviews in a public archive and approaching this topic with the interviewees.

The live memory of the repressive processes that have taken place in our country throughout history and the impunity that its material and intellectual perpetrators enjoyed – or are still enjoying – forced us to take certain security measures. Moreover, we are in a period in which open judicial processes imply, or at least could potentially imply, the end of that impunity.[26]

Placing the interviews in a public archive meant that that material could have uses and transmissions that were unimaginable by the interviewer and the interviewee. A basic safeguard measure in that sense was to restrict the access of the archive to students, human rights organizations, and accredited researches; to establish certain clauses for the use of the material,[27] and to create a release form in which the interviewee could establish accessibility criteria for his/her story.[28]

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[26] Pozzi (2011): "¿Existe una historia oral latinoamericana? (II)", Sección Debates, en *Red Latinoamericana de Historia Oral*, consultado el 10 de agosto de 2011 en: http://www.relaho.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=44%3Aiexiste-una-historia-oral-latinoamericana-ii&catid=1%3Adebates&Itemid=2&lang=es

[27] It was established as a condition that any use that was not strictly didactic or scientific, with commercial ends or that would imply the use of the audio and/or video of the interviews in a direct way requires previous authorization. Also, the use of the material as a justification of genocide was forbidden and a condition was established that its use must be respectful toward the interviewees. Naturally, the fact that the user accepts these clauses through signing a protocol of use does not guarantee that they will be met, but at least it establishes a legal coverage.

[28] Some of the options were: interview with name and surname or anonymous; complete text or a text edited by the interviewee, and interview archived for a specific number of years.

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While pondering the possible answers of the interviewees before this proposal, the first thing we thought they were going to feel was fear. This was a highly probable reaction if we take into consideration the context; just by remembering the disappearance of Jorge Julio López[29] or knowing that many of the survivors run into their repressors in the street of their hometown. As we considered this possibility, we decided to create a group space in which we could respond to their questions, fears, or doubts.

Fortunately, the results of this process were contrary to our assumptions: almost all of the interviewees authorized the inclusion of their stories and just a minority asked for anonymity.

The reflections that arose in the workshop gave us a clue toward understanding this situation: feelings that their stories were going to be used "to write history" and that they would be a legacy for new generations prevailed over other concerns.

Photographs of the consent release workshop

2.2. The Process of Transcribing From Oral to Text

Transcribing the interviews and editing the text to adapt it to the written speech was one of the most difficult stages of building the archive. Some of the obstacles had a practical nature: the differences between the manner of speaking of the interviewees and transcribers caused comprehension difficulties. Those of us who were more familiar with the dialect of the area had to revise the transcriptions.

Other difficulties were related to establishing criteria for adjusting the text to the written language. The decisions that were taken had ethical,

[29] Jorge Julio López, survivor of the military dictatorship, was a witness and plaintiff in the first oral and public trial that was made in Argentina after the annulment of the Obediencia Debida y Punto Final laws. On September 18 of 2006, day of the reading of the allegations for said trial, Jorge Julio López was kidnapped. Today he remains missing.

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political, and procedural consequences. Aside from the difficulties of how to make the text legible without altering its context and meaning, the problem of using "correct" Spanish or respecting the manner of speaking of the interviewees was considered.[30]

There are arguments in favor of both options. The manner of speaking of the interviewees are part of their culture and in that sense they should be respected; at the same time, they carry the stigma of "improper speech." Reading their own thoughts in a Spanish that they recognized as "wrong" can cause them rejection or shame. At the same time, keeping the literal text could cause comprehension difficulties for those who are not familiar with the manner of speaking of the region.

Eventually, we opted for adapting the language to its conventional use, prioritizing the understanding of the tex,t and respecting the oral context as much as possible.

We understand that this adjustment is just one of the many necessary modifications that are presented in transcriptions. The written text is neither the equivalent nor the replacement of the oral interview because it is not able to reflect the data that comes from oral and body language. Therefore, the transcriptions that are made available to the public are just guides that aim to simplify the work of those who review the material.

2.3. Cataloguing the Material and Devising Consultation Tools

The decisions pertaining to the organization and cataloguing process of the archive were guided by a very clear and important goal: to make the use and access of the material as easy and comfortable as possible.

Each interview has an index card with some basic details (place and time of the interview, length and basic data of the interviewee) and a summary of its contents through key words.

All of the transcriptions were archived in a digital library that allows searches for whole texts or by keywords, and browsing the material based on four indexing criteria (type of interviewee, name of the interviewee, historical times covered in the interview, and clandestine detention centers that are mentioned).

An issue that has been debated in this process was the classification to use in order to define the type of interviewee (survivor, relative, and witness). One of the main challenges was to establish criteria that, without

[30] For example, in the oral language of the popular classes of Tucuman the consonants at the end of the past participle are not pronounced ("he comío" instead of "he comido", "he salío" instead of "he salido"). They do not pronounce the S at the end of words either.

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ignoring the collective nature of the genocide process, allowed to show the specificity of different experiences which led to the repression.

We prefer not to use the expressions "victims" or "directly affected" because we understand that, whereas genocide attempts to reorder the relationships of society through terror, no one is left out of its reach and effects. We opted, instead for the categories of "survivor," "relative," and "witness," because we understand that they display awareness of the different levels of impact that the subjects have suffered based on several degrees of commitment and physical and perceptual exposure to the repressive processes.[31] This is not an attempt to establish hierarchies but rather to understand that these different levels of impact affect the circumstances and possibilities of processing and reconstructing both the individual and collective past.

Using these categories has not been exempt from problems and challenges. The traits of Famaillá's repressive process led us to include in the category of survivor all of those persons who were kidnapped, illegally detained, and tortured, regardless of the physical space in which this happened. This is due to the existence of many cases in which reclusion and torture of those who were kidnapped took place in spaces that cannot be classified as a Clandestine Detention Centre, for example, open fields, military camps, and private residences.

Using the "witness" category also brought up certain problems. It is defined as the negative (all of those persons who are neither survivors nor relatives), and implies a certain degree of unpredictability and homogenization of different experiences. For example, this category includes persons whose contact with the repressive apparatus was to know of its existence as a receiver of information, and subjects who have suffered attempts of the repressive forces without any fatal results. Obviously, the level of impact in both cases is substantially different.

3. Final Thoughts

Finally, we will discuss the ethical-political considerations that shaped the decision to create and build the archive. As previously mentioned, the archive originated from the need of putting the interviews in the public

[31] Diana Kordon, Lucila Edelman y otros, "Trauma social y psiquismo. Consecuencias clínicas de la violación de derechos humanos", en CINTRAS, EATIP, GTNM/RJ y SERSOC: *Paisajes del Dolor, Senderos de Esperanza. Salud Mental y Derechos Humanos en el Cono Sur*, Polemos, Buenos Aires, 2003.

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sphere. This need finds its root in the way in which we understand and designate the testimonies.

First, the interviews are the materialization of a collective process that involved the interviewees, us, and different participants of the community through the actions that have developed in Famaillá. That is why we believe that they should not be left in the private arena of the research team. Making the material public is, to us, a way of giving back to all of those who actively participated in this process.

Second, the testimonies are a way of registering the individual experiences of the interviewees in the collective space. The interview allows the communication of an experience in front of another who listens – us –, but also in front of "another virtual" – the public, "posterity"– represented in the recorder.[32] Making the archive materializes the entry of individual stories in a collective history. In that sense, it is a way of publicly acknowledging the experience of the victims and a symbolic act of reparation.

Both aspects added to conceive the interview as a legacy of family memory that allows intergenerational transmission; this led us to give to each interviewee a copy of the recording of their narration.[33]

Ultimately, the scarce production of knowledge around the theme of *Operativo Independencia*; the start of judicial proceedings in the province against those involved in the genocide; and the processes that started to develop around the creation of places of memory led us to propose the need of disseminating the material that was produced.

In broader terms, building the archive was a political act in the context of arguments for the production-preservation of the collective memory and the speech of truth that is built upon that historical moment. Concretely, we are seeking to start a debate about a historical event – the *Operativo Independencia* – whose handling has been prevented due to the implications it has in terms of political responsibility and because it goes against the calming effect that circumscribes genocide as an enterprise of the "military devil." We do it through the rescue and visibility of the stories and feelings of subjects whose voices, for the most part, haven't been registered in documentaries or conventional history.

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[32] Alberti, *Manual de história oral*, 112.

[33] To the persons who had established any type of accessibility restrictions to their testimony, a final version of the testimony just as it would be in the archive was given to them.

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