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Cousins: Exile, Questions, and Silences. Reconstructing Family Bonds among the Second Generation of Argentine Exiles in Mexico.

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Cousins: Exile, Questions, and Silences. Reconstructing Family Bonds among the Second Generation of Argentine Exiles in Mexico. [1]

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A Gerardo Necoechea, nuestro maestro.
Con mucho cariño y agradecimiento.

We are never alone —one never remembers alone, but with the help of others' memories and shared cultural codes, even though personal memories are unique and singular.

Elizabeth Jelin

In South America, during the second half of the 20th century and within the context of the Cold War, Operation Condor was developed, giving rise to multiple military dictatorships and resulting in mass exiles. On March 24, 1976, the Military Junta in Argentina carried out a coup d'état, marking the beginning of the bloodiest dictatorship in the country's history. Under the doctrine of National Security, they established a State terrorism regime that systematically violated human rights through practices such as persecution, imprisonment, assassination, torture, kidnapping, forced disappearance, the theft and systematic appropriation of children of political activists, intimidation, and the loss of employment, among many others.

In this context, between 300,000 and 500,000 people were forced to flee Argentina to save their lives (Bertoncello and Lattes, 1986, in Yankelevich, 2010:25). A significant number of these exiles found refuge in Mexico, with most of them—approximately 60% according to Yankelevich (2010:31)—choosing to settle in Mexico City. Some migrated with children, while others had them in their host country; these children are referred to as the second generation, children of exile, or more recently, as exiled children (Lojo, 2020, 2013; Alberione, 2018, 2021).

In Mexico, the exiles rebuilt their lives—some continued their political activism and denounced the human rights violations taking place in their country of origin, while others chose to step away from active struggle and focused on recovering or building a daily life in which they could grow personally, socially, and as families. They formed bonds of

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solidarity, primarily with other exiles, which allowed them to establish their lives in the new country and, above all, to raise their children despite being far from their blood relatives.

This article aims to share an ongoing research project that, through interviews and the review of personal family archives, reconstructs the collective memory of a group of cousins who, despite not sharing blood ties, recognize ourselves as family. What we have in common is that we are children of Argentine exiles in Mexico during the last civil-military dictatorship (1974–1983).

Those of us conducting this research are members of the aforementioned collective ("the cousins"), and both of us are ethnohistorians. This work is situated within exile studies and contemporary narrative approaches, with a specific focus on exiled children or the second generation. It explores reflections on identity, memory, and generational transmission, while also considering the particularity of simultaneously researching and being part of the very subject of study.

We are seven cousins—six of us participated in the interviews—and we come from four originally Argentine families who went into exile. We shared the first 20 years of our lives in Mexico City. Over time, some of us have migrated, and we now live in different countries: Mexico, Spain, the United States, and Argentina.

We began this project in May 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, using digital tools (Zoom and WhatsApp), which have allowed us—then and now—to overcome the challenges posed by distance in this research.

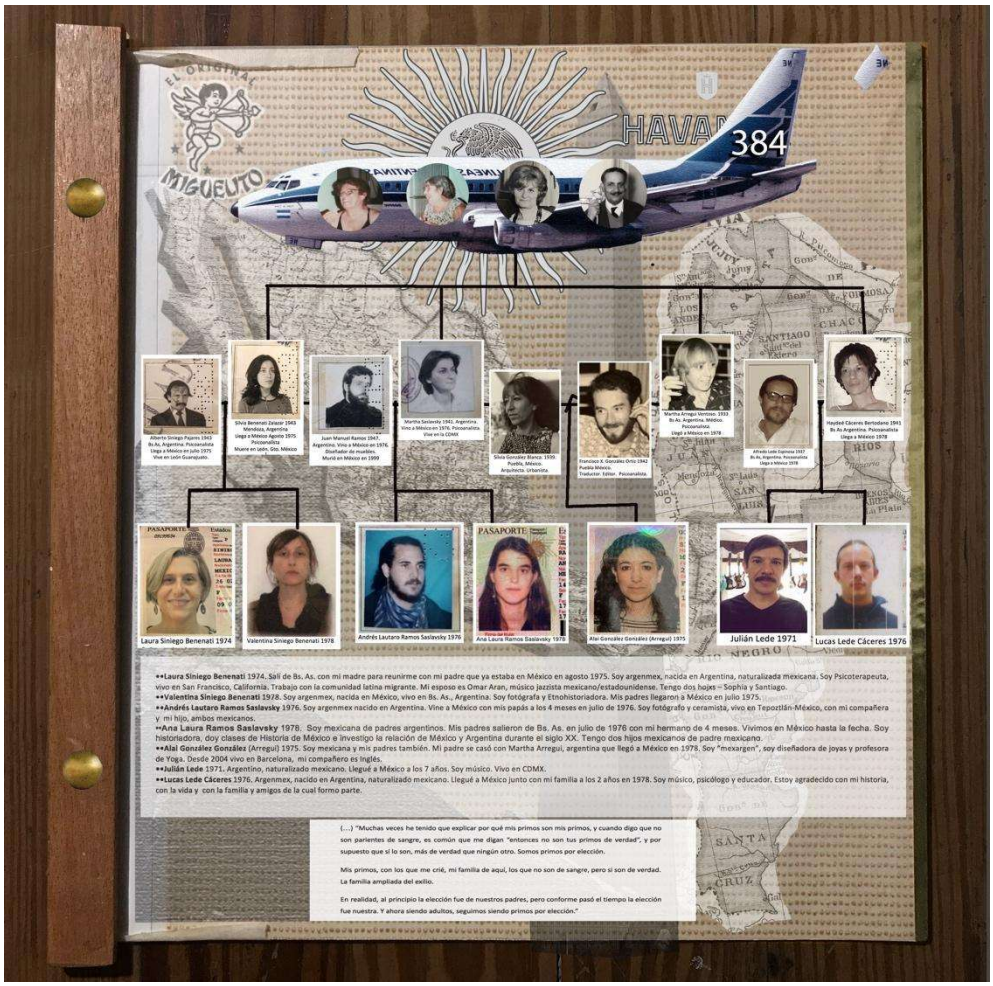
We started holding weekly meetings with the aim of reestablishing our "family everyday life." Shortly after beginning our regular group meetings, we received an invitation from the collective *Hijas e Hijos del Exilio* to contribute to the book *Cartografías de una memoria colectiva*, a project that gathers testimonies and reflections from the so-called second generation of Argentine exile.

Following this invitation, which we shared with the rest of the group, we proposed the idea of creating a sort of genealogical tree that would help clarify the basis of our notion of family—something we had never explicitly discussed. In other words, we sought to name what our kinship links would be in order to understand how we came to call ourselves cousins, and to explore and reflect on our own convention of self-perceiving as family. Creating that genealogical tree in a playful, almost game-like way sparked in the two of us a deeper interest, eventually transforming it into our research topic. Our goal became to identify not only the shared narrative, but also the personal experience and the underlying inheritance it carries.

We begin from a generational approach, drawing primarily on the work of Julio Aróstegui, who emphasizes generational interaction and the analysis of how certain experiences—mainly lived by one generation—impact subsequent generations: even if the event is the same, each generation will have its own interpretation and distinct experience (Aróstegui, 2004).

In our case, we analyze how a traumatic event experienced by our parents—exile—has shaped us as their children, and how we relate to that history. We understand exile not only as the act of leaving one's country in response to state violence and repression, nor as something limited to the years during which returning to the country of origin was forbidden. Rather, we conceive of exile as a phenomenon that generates effects extending across time and geography, resulting in an experience for us—the children—that is distinct from that of our parents.

Exile studies have primarily focused on the first generation, often considering the children merely as companions or witnesses. However, increasingly, the children of exiles are speaking out about their own histories. We believe it is essential to also place the second generation in a central role, since the lives of those of us who belong to this generation have been shaped by this experience—an experience that carries its own specific interpretations and consequences.



Collective collaboration for the book Cartografías de la memoria- Hijas e hijos del exilio. 2020.

Our interest has been to identify and analyze the particular characteristics of the generational transmission of the experience of exile, both in family narratives and in silences; to understand how we have inherited, lived, and interpreted it, based on the idea that "experience," as Jelin argues, "does not depend directly and linearly on the event or occurrence, but is mediated by language and by the cultural and interpretive framework in which it is expressed, thought, and conceptualized," with the understanding that all memory, even when individual and private, is inherently social in nature. (Jelin, 2020: 434).

The works of Elizabeth Jelin have been especially useful for engaging with the notion of generational transmission and memory in its intersubjective dimension. We have also drawn on Susana Kaufman's work regarding generational transmission processes within the family sphere, as well as Marianne Hirsch's contributions to approach the concept of postmemory. In addition, the work of Maurice Halbwachs has been fundamental in thinking about collective memory. Our work also aligns with new contemporary narratives that reclaim the first-person perspective to tell histories in which one is personally involved, as proposed by Leonor Arfuch and Eva Alberione.

We believe it is important to clarify that, although this study focuses on a small group of individuals, we do not speak only about ourselves. Rather, it brings to light issues that are intrinsic to the Argentine exile in Mexico in particular, to exiles more broadly, and even, quite possibly, to various migration experiences.

In the interviews we conducted, we addressed two main themes. The first is "Identity," explored in two dimensions: national and familial; the second is "Memory and Transmission," which includes issues such as the relationship with the experience of exile, the family narrative—with its silences and omissions—and the consequences of these. Both axes, "Identity" and "Memory and Transmission," are indivisibly intertwined and in constant resonance, each depending on and sustaining the other. However, in this work, we focus on the second axis: "Memory and Transmission." We are interested in exploring how each of us lived with traumatic experiences within the nuclear family. What kind of memory are we carriers of? How and why have we continued to reproduce the silences up to this point?

Having already decided to undertake this project, we organized an initial group interview in which we formally communicated to the group our intention to begin this research focused on memory, childhood, exile, and family—where we ourselves would be the object of study. We clearly and thoroughly explained our objectives and the methodology we would use, with the aim of establishing agreements regarding sensitive information and obtaining everyone's consent in order to create a safe, intimate, and familiar space that would later transition into the academic sphere. In this way, we invited them to share their own concerns and reflections about exile.

It is important to highlight that our group interviews marked the first time we collectively spoke about the experience of exile—each family's experience—and it became clear how little we actually knew about certain aspects of our own histories: the arrival of our cousins' parents, our uncles and aunts, as well as the more intimate and private experiences of each of us.

Our intention during the interview was not only to understand how much we individually know about exile as a historical event, but also as protagonists. How do we know what we know? What is our relationship to that knowledge?

We found that the narratives our cousins shared with us during the individual interviews evolved as they were being told. We observed the repetition of a cycle: at first, there was a shared certainty—everyone agreed that within their homes, the topic of exile could be addressed, that it was possible to talk about it. However, as the interviews progressed, this certainty began to shift. A sense of "responsibility" emerged in their accounts—the idea that their parents had answered, or would have answered, anything they asked was accompanied by the memory of having stopped asking questions themselves, in order to avoid the painful atmosphere that would arise. They protected their parents, refraining from exposing them to traumatic memories just to satisfy their curiosity or to verbalize what had already come to inhabit the realm of complicit omission.
We find that as we approach the age they were when they went into exile, new questions emerge—never easy to articulate—as well as a renewed, updated empathy. Yet, always somewhat childlike, the conversation remains forever unfinished about the fact that our own lives were also at stake in the hands of our parents. That ever-latent conversation, in turn, forges a kind of loyalty: not of risking life, but of saving it.

In summary, we found that although, in theory, it was possible at home to talk and ask within the family about the experience of exile, in practice we did not do so, since we knew these were very delicate issues. On this point, a text by Susana Kaufman is illuminating, as she argues that within family relationships "versions of history may remain untouched and unapproachable, sometimes so as not to stir up the past, sometimes because they belong to what has never been spoken." She refers to unspoken pacts about what cannot be asked or questioned, where "feelings of guilt and protection on the part of the younger generation toward the elders who have remained silent come into play, and therefore silences and symptoms tend to multiply." (Kaufman, 2006:50)

However, we find it important to mention that in carrying out this work we are giving words to what we never expressed collectively, much less publicly, which entails bypassing the obstacles posed by the structures Kaufman describes, while assuming the risks this represents. We do so with the recognition that these silences and absences were established and originated in an urgent need for survival. At the same time, speaking about them proves to be both healing and liberating.

In this way, we identify that within the mechanism of memory transmission and its gaps, silences are not only produced by the "narrators" or bearers of those experiences, but also by the receivers, through their silence or lack of demand to "know." This seems to stem from that intrinsic loyalty, where refraining from asking certain questions has more to do with preserving what Ricoeur calls "evasive" forgetting than with the will to know (Jelin, 2020: 324). These silences also shape certain structures of perception, which are constitutive of identity. In our case, we share a history that we do not speak about, and in this way silence becomes an additional factor of identification.

We set ourselves the task of evoking shared childhood scenes which, when spoken aloud for the first time, revealed both the particular and the natural aspects of our experiences.
We placed special emphasis on the syncretism of our family meals in Mexico: the large asados (a gastronomic ritual and Argentina's national dish), orchestrated by our fathers, accompanied by other typical Mexican foods such as tortillas and chiles, always present on

the table. This first evoked scene brought forth, one after another, moments marked by that same binational, bicultural particularity, identifying us as *argenmex*—the demonym used to name those who share this exilic experience. We sought to define, beyond convention, what it means to be *argenmex*: what makes us identify with this concept, and what to do with the perpetual foreignness that the very term confers—the dichotomy of belonging to both countries and to neither at the same time.

We recognized that, in our childhood imagination, although we did not have our families close by, when the grandparents of any one of us came from Argentina to visit, we experienced it as "the visit of the grandparents," as if they were the grandparents of each of us. They told us about the same land our parents came from; they spoke and even smelled the same, and we naturally recognized them as grandparents. They brought us a little piece of that country, mostly in the form of sweets, which we treasured. These were the flavors of our parents' childhood, which we, in turn, missed. They were flavors that answered to their nostalgia, while we longed for what we had never had: an Argentina that was supposed to be ours, but wasn't—it was far away.

Just as we identified the mechanics of longing, we also detected them in relation to fears and desires, a kind of inheritance and loyalty. The adults' conversations revolved around issues that were happening or had happened in Argentina, heated tones, deep discussions, unfinished phrases, built upon the architecture of "secrecy"—truths left unspoken but clearly understood by all the adults. For us as children, however, they were distant and difficult to grasp; we never heard them fully articulated. And yet, speaking today, we understand that those conversations were part of our imaginary, and that we eventually came to understand what they were about: prison, torture, death, disappearance, etc. Discreetly, we paid close attention to those adult exchanges; our games, our imagined scenarios, revealed the evident understanding of those conversations—such as staging battles between soldiers and guerrillas, or planning infallible tortures for Videla, Reagan, or Hitler: death by tickling, tiny cuts with paper sprinkled with lemon juice, among countless other, of course, highly ineffective methods.

In our research, we decided to delve into our fears, drawing on Jelin's idea that one of the characteristics of traumatic experiences is the massive impact they provoke, which creates an incapacity to speak or narrate them. Behind the silence and the omission of explicit questions on the part of the receiver, fear emerges to occupy the gap left by silence (Jelin, 2020:329). We understand the concept of fear as the capacity to recognize oneself as vulnerable in the face of an external agent, with the aim of activating resources, capacities, and strategies to safeguard and preserve physical and psychological integrity.

During the interviews, we asked: *What are you afraid of?* We found fundamental fears that we recognize as consequences of the experience of exile, such as: fear of authorities, of power in its different forms, of the dissolution of bonds, and of being identified or located. On this point, a fragment from one of our interviews is illustrative:

At some point it did leave me with the feeling that you have to be careful not to be seen. I realize that doing paperwork is hard for me; and I know it's silly—at a rational level it's one

thing, but at the bodily level [it's another]. I remember as a child, when we went to do paperwork, there was a certain tension in my parents, and that's something that lingers somewhere. I recognize this sense of fear in my parents that 'something might happen'. (Interview with Andres Ramos Saslavsky, 07/11/2021)

That unspoken "something," we believe, is the possibility of "disappearing," of being disappeared. In this account, we also identify fear in relation to figures of state power, as a form of identification with the parents' generation—a fear that is not rational, yet remains present and shapes perception.

In another interview, we found that the interviewee feels fear when, in an unfamiliar context, she is asked for her personal information. She is afraid to give her name and surname, to tell her story—even though nearly 50 years have passed since the exile. She is still afraid of speaking and being recognized; she relates this to not knowing the exact details of her parents' militancy, and the fear that by sharing information she might expose them.

Another interviewee spoke very clearly about the fear of relational dissolution, sharing his fear of loneliness—not of being alone, but of the loneliness of having no one, of broken bonds: *"It fragmented, it broke. More than fear, it is sadness."* (Interview with Lucas Lede Cáceres, 08/03/2021)

Another interviewee shared a childhood memory:
"When I was little, my mother told me: If, under some possible kidnapping situation, someone tries to take you into a car, scream, scream and resist, even if they threaten to kill you. It is better that they shoot you right there, in front of the car and leave you there. It is better to die, than to be taken and for no one to ever hear from you again." (Collective interview, 05/09/2021)

Unfortunately, however paradoxical it may seem, today we believe that far from appearing unreasonable that a mother would teach this to her child, in that context—and even now, in a context where 30,000 are still missing in Argentina and 126,246 in Mexico (a number that continues to rise dramatically every day), and where mothers and grandmothers continue searching and will go on searching—that lesson does not seem so far-fetched.

The interviews have a double dimension: form and content. In this exercise we simultaneously explored the mechanism of narrative construction; we sought to identify points of convergence among interviewees in order to reveal the nuances through which the different narratives establish correspondences, creating an explicit connection between Identity, Memory, and Transmission, and shedding light on our work by weaving together the individual and the collective.

Screenshot of Zoom session. Collective interview, March 21, 2021.

We find it important to point out that we consider some of these fears to have been transmitted unconsciously by the first generation of exile, mainly through silences.

We would also like to note that, four years after the first group interview, despite the fact that we all agreed to participate in the project and that we shared information and stories with enthusiasm and naturalness—emphasizing the importance of carrying it out, as well as the shared idea of how reparative it was—having identified spaces of silence, unresolved griefs, and fragmented memories (Kaufman, 2006), today it strikes us that we have not spoken about the subject again. We also regard this as a trait worth considering, from which we may infer a possible perpetuation and persistence of the structure and relationship with silence and loyalty, and even a certain resistance to the "responsibility" of occupying that "first-person" position.

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Interviews

Collective interview conducted by Valentina Siniego Benenati and Ana Laura Ramos Saslavsky, with Laura Siniego Benenati, Alai González González, Andres Ramos Saslavsky, and Lucas Lede Cáceres, March 21, 2021, via Zoom.

Collective interview conducted by Valentina Siniego Benenati and Ana Laura Ramos Saslavsky, with Laura Siniego Benenati, Alai González González, Andres Ramos Saslavsky, and Lucas Lede Cáceres, May 9, 2021, via Zoom.

Collective interview conducted by Valentina Siniego Benenati and Ana Laura Ramos Saslavsky, with Laura Siniego Benenati, Alai González González, Andres Ramos Saslavsky, and Lucas Lede Cáceres, June 13, 2021, via Zoom.

Interview conducted by Valentina Siniego Benenati and Ana Laura Ramos Saslavsky, with Andres Ramos Saslavsky, July 11, 2021, via Zoom.

Interview conducted by Valentina Siniego Benenati and Ana Laura Ramos Saslavsky, with Laura Siniego Benenati, July 4, 2021, via Zoom.

Interview conducted by Valentina Siniego Benenati and Ana Laura Ramos Saslavsky, with Alai González González, July 13, 2021, via Zoom.

Interview conducted by Valentina Siniego Benenati and Ana Laura Ramos Saslavsky, with Lucas Lede Cáceres, August 3, 2021, via Zoom.