

Half hour hearing for a life ruined

2 May 2014

It's a late summer's day in Argentinian March and I've returned to the Federal Court in Buenos Aires, not far from Retiro station and the port at Río de la Plata. Several different oral proceedings are held here every day in connection with the crimes of the Argentinian military dictatorship. For the last two years senior army members have been on trial here for their role in Operation Condor, the US-backed countrywide oppression of the regime's opponents in the seventies, a period when military dictatorships controlled all of South America. The trial comprises 106 counts of abduction and murder of mainly Uruguayan victims. Further down the corridor another court is examining the secret detention and torture center El Vesubio. The center's former detainees include German woman Elisabeth Käsemann, who was subject to abuse at the prison in the summer of 1977.

In another one of the courtrooms, the world's biggest criminal trial for crimes against humanity is currently underway, with the court examining crimes committed at the Navy's ESMA torture center. I've come here today to accompany my client, German citizen Betina Ruth Ehrenhaus, who is giving evidence in her role as a witness and joint plaintiff. On 5 August 1979 she and her partner Pablo Lepiscopo were kidnapped and imprisoned at ESMA. Betina, then a twenty year old militant, managed to survive.

At a rapid pace she runs through the events of that day: she is on her way home from a barbeque with her in-laws when she is stopped by three vehicles and thrown into a car by a dozen armed men. She is hooded and taken to ESMA, where an estimated 5,000 people were murdered under the dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. The hood means she can't see much but she can hear the takeoff and landing of the airplanes used to drop some of the prisoners over the Rio de la Plata, the air smells of burnt flesh, she isn't given any food and can't drink anything because of the electric shock torture. After a few days, she is released. Unlike her partner, whose whereabouts are still unknown.

It's a story about one ruined life – many ruined lives – and it's all over in less than 30 minutes. Proceedings are particularly swift as the bored defense lawyers for the military fail to ask any questions at first. While the rapid pace can be unsettling for the uninitiated, there's also

something reassuring about the routine nature of the trial – one of dozens underway across the country. Over the last ten years almost 500 people including high ranking army and police officers have been convicted under the successive presidencies of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner.

The only disturbance comes during a break in the proceedings as a couple of armed robocops spring out of armored vans that have pulled up outside the court. Moments later the officers return, bundling a man in a bulletproof vest and handcuffs into one of the vans. A Columbian drug dealer, I'm told.

Like many victims called on to give evidence, Betina Ehrenhaus, a tango singer normally brimming with confidence, is visibly anxious today. Despite her nerves she uses her closing remarks to criticize the way the German embassy in Buenos Aires handled the case at the time. In her fight for the release of her partner, Betina was one of many who felt let down by the diplomats. An Argentinian secret service officer going under the name Major Peirano was allowed to interrogate relatives of disappeared German citizens on the embassy's premises; embassy staff failed to intervene.

The trial is likely to finish up this year. In the absence of any upcoming surprises the verdicts will be similar to those already handed down to senior army officers in previous cases: lengthy if not lifelong prison sentences. That's the very least hoped for by Betina Ehrenhaus and other victims of the dictatorship. But for the long anticipated information on the fate of her disappeared partner Pablo Lepiscopo, the wait continues.