

## IPS

I thought carefully before writing these lines. I was the director of the Latin American section of Inter Press Service, first in Buenos Aires between 1974 and 1977 and then in Rome. My work back then was intrinsically connected to general political and personal events. Then my memory, almost 40 years later, erases the superfluous, the details, to focus on the most important events. Saint Agustin used to say that memory is like a large storage full of recollections that appear when one summons them. With trivial ones, that is how it happens. So, in order to be truthful, this text is a part of a life story indelibly written in my spirit.

The agency occupied a flat with few rooms in a building located in the centre of Buenos Aires. There, teletype machines would the cables of different correspondents established in several Latin American countries, and from there, we would transmit to the headquarters in Rome (also through teletype) after reading and evaluating them. The Argentinean journalistic team was small, but efficient: it gathered people with years of experience in the trade who were willing to carefully inform about the most important events and those that the major press used to disdain.

Funny situations happened at the time but the context was not exactly funny. The self-baptised Triple A – Argentinean Anti-Communist Alliance – started activities in November 1973. The Triple A was made up of para-military groups and paid thugs, organised by the then minister of social welfare and the right hand of President Peron, Jose Lopez Rega, also known as “The Warlock” or “Lopecito” (Little Lopez), depending. After the death of Peron in July 1974, his wife and vice-president Estela Martinez Peron followed and nothing stopped the Triple A: it murdered more than two thousand trade union leaders, students and “leftist” intellectuals until the coup decided to leave aside its civilian clothes and start wearing military uniforms on 24 March 1976. The result was striking: 30,000 “desaparecidos”.

It is necessary to point out that the word “desaparecido” encloses four concepts: the kidnapping of unarmed citizens, their torture, their murder and the disappearance of their bodies. Two major professionals of IPS suffered that destiny: Roberto Carri and Luis Guagnini. Their remains were never recovered.

At the beginning of 1975, the Triple A had IPS in its sights, and the difficulties of obtaining information were multiplying. In an act of solidarity, Savio decided to transfer the direction of the Latin American network to Rome, a task shared by four colleagues. Every day, news arrived from the southern part of South America about killings and “disappearances” that the agency would punctually distribute. Several IPS journalists had to flee and rebuild their personal and professional lives in exile. This was not easy, but many managed.

In August 1976, an IPS team of which I was part of travelled to Colombo, Sri Lanka, to cover the 5<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement. General Tito was there, great leader of the movement, unshakable with his 80 years of age and a bottle of whisky always at hand. Savio organised and directed our work, openly supporting the movements of national liberation. The professional photographers – professionals from where, magazines and newspapers or the CIA and MI6? – did not tire of photographing us. In that meeting I had the privilege of meeting the Chilean historian Hernan Santa Cruz, one of the writers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Funny moments were not missing in Colombo. One time I took a taxi and the driver’s English was bad as mine which allowed us to understand each other perfectly. On seeing my journalist credential from an Italian-based news agency, he started to remember the times of Augustus when “the powerful from Rome used our emeralds”. Suddenly he stopped and with intense sorrow, as if it had happened yesterday, exclaimed: “Poor Julius Cesar! How he was murdered!”.

There were other kinds of episodes. On 12 August 1976, in the middle of the conference, the Lebanese phalangist militia destroyed the **Tel el-Zaatar** Palestinian refugee camp, east of Beirut. They did it with the support of Syria and the number of Palestinian dead was estimated to reach more than a thousand. The members of the Palestinian delegation were heartbroken. I was close to

one, who with his face covered in tears repeated over and over again “How is this possible? The Syrians are our Arab brothers!!”.

A few days after my return to Rome they told me that the military had “disappeared” my son and my seven-month-pregnant daughter-in-law. But that is another story. It hit me when I was a journalist for Inter Press Service.

**Juan Gelman**, *The journalists who turned the world upside down: Voices of Another Information*. The CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (June 25, 2012), pp.191-193