



GUILLERMO PEREZ ROISINBLIT

Raised by a former air force intelligence officer, Pérez Roisinblit (pictured as a child, right) discovered the truth about his birth after he was contacted by his biological sister, Marianna (top, pictured with Pérez Roisinblit in 2003). His parents, José Manuel Pérez and Patricia Roisinblit (pictured above) were members of the left-wing Montoneros guerrilla group who "disappeared" in the "Dirty War".

ORPHANED AND STOLEN BECAUSE THEIR PARENTS WERE LEFT-WING

Ed Stocker meets the victims of Argentina's 'Dirty War' who lost parents – and the truth of their identities

Imagine if your life turned out to be a lie. Imagine if the stories you were raised on and the values you had been taught were the product of an enormous deceit. Imagine if your parents were not relatives at all and even complicit in the death of your biological family.

Of all the violations that took place during Argentina's "Dirty War" – conducted under the country's last military dictatorship, which ruled between 1976 and 1983 – the abduction of children born to left-wing parents was based on the most twisted logic.

But until an historic court ruling in Buenos Aires last week, in which two former de facto presidents, among others, received heavy prison sentences, there had been no formal recognition of the junta's chilling plan.

"Discovering that you're not the son of who you think you are, but the son of someone else you'll never know – and that you were born in captivity – that's too much to deal with," said Guillermo Pérez Roisinblit, sitting in the living room of his one-storey house 40 minutes' train ride from the Argentinian capital. "It's like someone pulling out the ground from under your feet and suddenly you're starting to fall."

It is thought around 500 babies were abducted during the dictatorship. Their

parents were arrested without charge and held in hundreds of detention centres that operated in Argentina, where they were tortured for their political beliefs. In the camps, pregnant women knew that their child's arrival was also their death sentence.

The military always waited for the mothers to give birth before they killed them – often by throwing them out of planes over the Río de la Plata (River Plate). Military families brought up their offspring and hid the children's true origins. The aim was to ensure they wouldn't follow the "perverse" ideologies of their mothers and fathers.

"Does the word love have a place in a relationship that began like that?" asked Victoria Montenegro, 35, as she nurses an espresso in downtown Buenos Aires. Her voice quivers as she talks about the abductors who raised her. "This was a relationship that was the result of the violation and subjugation of someone else. They tortured our mothers, made them disappear and then kept hold of us. No, the word love has no place here."

Mr Pérez Roisinblit and Ms Montenegro are two of the 105 stolen babies who have been identified since Argentina's return to democracy, mostly through the painstaking work of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, a group

of grandmothers searching for the children of their disappeared daughters.

Ms Montenegro is one of the few babies from these cases born in liberty, before she was kidnapped with her parents when she was 13 days old. Mr Pérez Roisinblit was born in the infamous ESMA torture camp in Buenos Aires.

Ms Montenegro grew up as María Sol Tetzlaff, thinking she was the daughter of Lieutenant Colonel Hernán Tetzlaff. She was raised in what she refers to as an ultra-conservative environment that included schooling in a nunnery.

Her world fell apart in the late 1980s when the first abduction accusations were levelled against Tetzlaff and his wife, Ms Montenegro, around 10 at the time, found herself caught up in a

complicated court case that dragged on for years before she finally discovered her true identity in 2000.

In May, DNA tests finally showed that a body washed ashore in Uruguay in 1976 were the remains of Roque Orlando Montenegro, Victoria's father.

Her parents had been left-wing militants from the People's Revolutionary Army when they were kidnapped a month before the military coup in the same year. Her mother, Hilda Ramona Torres, has never been found.

When a girl came to see Mr Pérez Roisinblit at his workplace asking questions about his birth, he wasn't interested.

"I didn't have much desire to see her," said the 33-year-old, who also

found out his real identity in 2000. "Here was a person who knew my full name and was asking if I wanted to talk to her. But I didn't know her. As well, she had a friend there with a baby in her arms. Two girls, one with a baby, asking questions. You can imagine what I thought. I was 21 at the time."

He grudgingly accepted a letter from one of the girls – Mariana – and tucked it in a book. It explained that Mariana thought they were brother and sister, and that Mr Pérez Roisinblit – whose surname was Gómez at the time – was the son of disappeared Montoneros (left-wing guerrillas) Patricia Roisinblit and José Manuel Pérez.

"I opened the book and found myself staring at a picture of my [real] mother and father," he said. "At the time I didn't know it was them. But my likeness to the man in the photo shocked me."

Mr Pérez Roisinblit gave a DNA sample to the national database. A month later he was coming to terms with his real identity as well as getting to know a sister and grandmother he never knew he had.

Both Ms Montenegro and Mr Pérez Roisinblit have come a long way since their earth-shattering discoveries. It has been a confusing and disturbing road that has often thrown up more questions than answers. Both have



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VICTORIA MONTENEGRO

The 35-year-old was raised as an army colonel's daughter before discovering her true identity in 2000. She is pictured here holding a portrait of her biological father, Roque Orlando Montenegro, during a press conference in Buenos Aires in May, when it was announced that DNA results had finally identified the remains of a body that washed ashore in Uruguay in 1976 as his.

STATE BRUTALITY THE 'DIRTY WAR'

Up to 30,000 people are believed to have been killed or "disappeared" during Argentina's last military dictatorship between 1976 and 1982 – a period of state brutality known as the "Dirty War".

Generals staged a coup on 24 March 1976, toppling the ineffective administration of President Isabel Martínez de Perón. The country's new rulers began rounding up suspected left-wing guerrillas and their sympathisers, sending them to torture camps before killing them.

Pregnant prisoners were killed after their babies were born, the infants were given false birth certificates and raised by military families.

Raul Alfonsín became Argentina's first democratically elected leader in 1983 after the collapse of military rule, and began the process of trying the armed forces for human rights abuses.

It was later stymied by impunity laws, which were only lifted in the last decade.

found themselves at the centre of highly-politicised court cases in which they felt they had to choose between the abductors who raised them, and a new biological family of strangers they had to get to know from scratch.

Ms Montenegro and Mr Pérez Roisinblit admit to feeling an attachment to their abductors – the people they had once thought were their parents – as they watched them being sent to prison. Tetzlaff was sentenced to eight years in prison and his wife spent six years under house arrest.

Tetzlaff was never convicted for the death of Ms Montenegro's real parents, although she believes he is responsible. Impunity laws in place at the time of his conviction failed to recognise the state-sponsored stealing of babies and also pardoned some of the dictatorship's worst atrocities.

Ms Montenegro talks about a "human link" she had with them, and admits she kept in contact until they died – something her newly discovered maternal grandparents never accepted.

"I know they're not my parents," she said. "But I also spent many years of my life with them and I don't have any feeling of hate for them."

Mr Pérez Roisinblit said he never had much of a relationship with Francisco Gómez, the man he thought was his fa-

ther. Gómez – a divorcee and former air force intelligence officer – was convicted in 2004 and sentenced to seven years in prison. Mr Pérez Roisinblit maintains a relationship with Gómez's ex-wife, who was also convicted.

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Like Ms Montenegro, Mr Pérez Roisinblit is now married with his own family. His son and daughter have given him a chance, he said, to start celebrating his own birthday again, as well as Mother's and Father's Day – dates that used to cause a flood of tears.

In February, his four-year-old son Ignacio asked who the elderly people in the picture frames were.

"I explained to him that they're his grandparents," Mr Pérez Roisinblit said. "He knows that they're no longer here and that bad people killed them. He knows that the person who brought me up isn't my mother and that grandma Patricia and grandpa José are in heaven, up in the stars."

JORDAN

Islamists boycott election

The powerful Muslim Brotherhood has said it will boycott the forthcoming parliamentary elections in protest at the kingdom's election laws, saying that recent reforms fall short of its demands.

A boycott by the Brotherhood's political party, the Islamic Action Front, would deal a blow to King Abdullah II, who has made his reforms campaign the centrepiece of efforts to stave off Arab Spring-style protests.

The elections, expected by the end of the year although no date has been set, are critical to the king's campaign. He has changed 42 articles, or

one-third of Jordan's 60-year-old constitution, giving parliament a say in appointing the cabinet – a task which used to be his sole prerogative.

"The government left us no choice but to boycott the elections because it did not show any seriousness toward real reforms," a Brotherhood spokesman, Jamil Abu-Bakr, said.

Mr Abu-Bakr said the Brotherhood – the largest opposition group – may reverse its decision if the government acted promptly on its demands. "We will leave that discussion until a time when the government undertakes serious and real efforts toward reforms," he said. AP

GERMANY

Merkel vow on circumcision

Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman promised the Jewish and Muslim communities yesterday that they would be free to circumcise young boys despite a court ban which has provoked concerns about religious freedom.

In a country sensitive to allegations of intolerance because of the Holocaust, the government said it would find a way around the ban.

"It is absolutely clear that we want to have Jewish and Muslim religious life in Germany," said Ms Merkel's spokesman, Steffen Seibert. "Circumcision carried out in a responsible manner must be possible without punishment." REUTERS

AFGHANISTAN

Female official assassinated

A regional head of women's affairs was killed by a car bomb in eastern Afghanistan yesterday.

Hanifa Safi was driving through Mehtar Lam, the capital of Laghman province, when a bomb attached to the underside of her car exploded, said the provincial governor's spokesman. She had been known locally for going out without her head covered. Her husband and daughter were injured. No one has yet claimed responsibility.

Ms Safi is the second provincial head of women's affairs to be assassinated since the posts were created 10 years ago in each of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. REUTERS



UNITED STATES

Dressed for the occasion

Dachshunds Clifford, left, and his cousin Dee Dee wait to take part in the world's most expensive pet "wedding". Baby Hope Diamond, a Coton de Tulear, "married" her poodle groom, Chilly Pasternak, on Thursday night, raising \$158,187.26 (over £100,000) for the Humane Society of New York. AP