



LEV WEISFEILER

MISSING: The Tragic Case of Boris Weisfeiler

He was a Jewish mathematician and hiking enthusiast who, Chile says, drowned in a shallow river in 1984. Not so, insists his sister, who blames Jewish groups among others for failing to act in the case, but says the truth may now finally be coming out.

Netty C. Gross

THE DAYS LEADING UP TO Boris Weisfeiler's winter-break hiking trip to Chile on Christmas Eve of 1984 were busy but uneventful. Weisfeiler, 43, an unmarried, Soviet-born, Jewish mathematician at Penn State University — who had arrived in the U.S. as a stateless refugee from Moscow in 1975, and became a naturalized citizen in 1981 — was an experienced hiker who had trekked through Alaska, Siberia, China, Canada and Peru's Andes mountains. He was also cautious. In preparation for his trip, along the mountains near the border between Chile and Argentina, he obtained a State Department-issued "world status map," which identified war zones and dangerous areas for U.S. trav-

elers. This map, later found on Weisfeiler's Penn State office desk, indicated that travel to Chile was not dangerous.

Confident that he was heading for another exciting trek, Weisfeiler, bearded, thin and wiry, spent the week prior to his departure, on the December 24 LAN Chilean Airlines flight from New York to Santiago, visiting Russian-Jewish émigré mathematician friends living in Boston. He hung out at the home of Harvard University math professor David Kazhdan, who remembers Weisfeiler as being upbeat. "Hiking was his way of relaxing."

Weisfeiler phoned his younger sister, Olga, a microbiologist living in Moscow, who anxiously mentioned his previous encounters with wild bears in Canada and questioned his need to "travel so far away." Promising to ring her back upon his return

DETERMINED TO 'GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THIS': Olga still nurses faint hopes that her brother is alive

to Penn State in the second week of January, he laughed that it was "freezing cold in the U.S. and summer in Chile," Olga recalls. "He reminded me that animals weren't dangerous, people were."

The observation was prophetic. What Weisfeiler could not know was that the State Department, despite its assurance about the safety of Chile, was in fact awash in classified reports detailing severe human rights abuses by General Augusto Pinochet's military regime, including arrests, disappearances, torture and political killings.

Nor did Weisfeiler know that the last stop on his itinerary, the small, picturesque village of San Fabian de Alico, from where he hoped to catch a bus back to Santiago, lay just a few kilometers from Colonia Dignidad, a settlement inhabited by a heavily armed, anti-Semitic sect. Home to several hundred German émigrés, Colonia Dignidad was already suspected by human rights groups (and later confirmed) as being a military torture and detention camp, used by Pinochet's National Intelligence Directorate (DINA) security services, from which several dozen people disappeared.

Boris Weisfeiler never did return from his vacation. He did reach southern Chile, rented a room in a small inn, and encountered two herdsmen, brothers. On or around January 3, they helped him cross a body of water with their horse — for which he let them share his tent and gave them chocolate and fishing tools. Then he vanished.

On January 15, Weisfeiler's backpack — which he had used to carry his personal belongings back when he left the Soviet Union in 1975, and which still bore Cyrillic letters — was reported by the Chilean authorities to have been found, dry and without mold, but with passport, wallet, return ticket and money all missing, on the edge of the River Nuble, not far from the colony. And on March 6, Weisfeiler was declared dead by the Chilean government, whose official position was that he had drowned trying to cross the Nuble — although it was only four feet deep.

Olga, who herself immigrated to the U.S. three years after Weisfeiler disappeared, never accepted this. "It makes no sense," she says today. "My brother was a very experienced hiker. The river is shallow. And how come his backpack showed no sign of having been under water?"

Weisfeiler's mathematical friends were also disbelieving. "The 'explanation' that he drowned was absurd," says Kazhdan, who is today a visiting professor of math-

Where Ex-Nazis Plotted with Pinochet's Henchmen

COLONIA DIGNIDAD, THE settlement in southern Chile where Boris Weisfeiler was apparently incarcerated, tortured and murdered, was founded as an agricultural community in the mid-1950s by a group of ethnic Germans. In 1961, they were joined and then headed by Paul Schaefer, a former nurse in the Luftwaffe who had escaped to Chile from Germany, where he was charged with sexually molesting boys in a orphanage he ran.

Human rights reports have identified the colony as a detention and torture center starting from 1973. Collaboration with General Augusto Pinochet's security apparatus began a year later. Numerous accusations of sexual exploitation of children and fraud have also been levelled at the colony and Schaefer, today, 80, is a fugitive from the law. In 1991, with the advent of democracy in Chile, the colony's tax-exempt status was formally withdrawn and its name changed to Villa Baviera.

Carlos Basso, 30, general editor of "Cronica" — the largest-circulation daily in Concepcion, Chile's second largest city, which lies about 100 miles north of the colony — has "no doubt that some of the most important supporters of Pinochet's brutal security apparatus" were officials from Colonia Dignidad.

The colony, he says, served as a sort of intelligence headquarters where the regime, "helped by former Nazis,

planned its operations." And it remains a center of power, he says. "People who live there know a great deal about the dark roles played there by many Chileans currently in politics."

The colony, says Basso, has some 300 adherents, most of whom are German speakers. Married couples generally live apart, dormitory style. Not surprisingly, he says, there is a low rate of childbirth. But many Chilean boys, children of impoverished peasants, he says, have either been kidnapped or sold to the cult. Few residents leave the compound and contact with members is nearly impossible. Basso says rumors have circulated over the years that Josef Mengele found refuge there.

Basso, who is not Jewish, says he was attracted to Weisfeiler's story "because it happened not far from where I live. I am offended by this story. It is cruel." His book, "The Last Secret of Colonia Dignidad," an account of the Weisfeiler affair, goes on sale in Chilean bookstores on October 25.

Basso believes Weisfeiler and others murdered there may be buried in a secret mountain cemetery behind the colony, which is near the confluence of the Los Sauces and Nuble Rivers — where Weisfeiler's backpack was discovered. The mountain's inappropriate name, he notes sadly, is Maravilla — "wonderful." ●

N.C.G.

ematics at the Hebrew University, on sabbatical from Harvard. Noting that the U.S. government never formally questioned the Chilean government position, he adds: "The United States government has behaved terribly throughout this tragedy."

A trove of declassified State Department documents, released in January 2000 as part of the Clinton Administration's special Chile Declassification Project, appears to confirm the strong sense of foul play and Chilean government cover-up. It appears to confirm, in fact, that Weisfeiler was one of some 1,100 *desaparecidos* (disappeared persons) — but the only American — who vanished during the Pinochet military regime in the years from 1973-90.

The documents include reports of interviews conducted by American consular officials with various Chilean military informants, and purported eyewitness accounts. These suggest that Weisfeiler was

kidnapped by Chilean state security officers, who were tipped off by one of the herdsmen. His Jewish identity, American passport, Russian name and beat-up Russian-lettered bag apparently triggered suspicions that he was a Russian or "Jewish" spy or possibly working for Israeli Nazi hunters. The Chileans, the documents further indicate, removed him to Colonia Dignidad, where he was called a "Jewish dog," "savagely interrogated," and kept in "animal-like conditions" (possibly for as long as two years), and slain by the Germans with the tacit approval of the Chileans: He was "made to kneel and executed with a shot in the nape of his neck," according to one of the documented eyewitness testimonies.

Whatever the reliability of the testimonies, the documents make unequivocally clear that the U.S. consular officials in Santiago never believed the official

Chilean version of events but were repeatedly denied the \$3,000 in funds they sought from the State Department to pursue a deeper investigation. An offer from the American Mathematical Society to help pay for costs was also spurned.

In 1998, with a 15-year statute of limitations about to expire, Olga won a Chilean court ruling for an investigation of the case. Judge Juan Guzman, the special prosecutor tasked with bringing Pinochet to justice, assumed responsibility. (Today aged 86, Pinochet was returned from London for trial in March 2000, but all charges were dropped three months ago.) But Guzman has made no progress to date.

NOW, THOUGH. OLGA WEISFEILER senses that the momentum is finally building for a resolution of the mystery. The American media is starting to show interest, and a Chicago law firm is pushing the case pro bono.

Before she gets into the reasons for guarded optimism, however, Olga, in extensive telephone interviews from her home in Newton, Massachusetts, details her fury at the "slow and frankly suspect" pace of Chilean investigation, and especially at the indifference she claims to have encountered from every Jewish group she has approached down the years. Even after 2000, says Olga, now 58 and retired, when the declassified documents indicated that Weisfeiler "had been tortured by pro-Nazis because he was a Jew, nobody would even bother to answer my letters."

Olga supplied The Report with a detailed history of her attempts to enlist help from various groups including the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League and the Wiesenthal Center. The Wiesenthal Center says it did respond to her letter but heard nothing more from her. The ADL says it took the case very seriously and made "numerous inquiries" on her behalf, but to no avail.

And while she acknowledges that Boris was not an Israeli citizen, she has also been disappointed by the profound lack of interest shown by Israel's Foreign Ministry, despite the fact that Boris may have been falsely accused of spying for "Israeli Nazi hunters." She did have a meeting in December 2000 with Israeli diplomats at the embassy in Santiago, but says nothing came of it. (The Israeli Foreign Ministry says it is now looking into the matter.)

She is also furious with State Department officials, "for giving me the run around for so many years when they knew something awful had happened to my brother. I am heartsick at the idea that Boris was alive and suffering, undoubtedly hoping that his new country would save him while, in reality, the State Department couldn't find a few thousand dollars in its budget to hire an investigator!" Nor, she says, can she understand why the government is still not "pressuring the Chileans to come forward with the truth." (The State Department says it is still in touch with the Chilean government "at the highest levels" and has offered FBI assistance.)

Still, Olga says she is starting to feel hopeful now. For one thing, Peter

investigation was done at the time of Boris's disappearance," or if there was an investigation, why the information elicited was not acted upon.

BORIS AND OLGA ARE THE children of Jules (Gyula) Weisfeiler, a prominent Hungarian-born microbiologist, and Anna Bernstein, a neurologist. Some of Weisfeiler's love of "escaping" to nature and hiking, Olga believes, stems from the fact that he was beaten as a child for being Jewish and that his parents were persecuted professionally. He took up hiking seriously at age 13. A gifted mathematician, he was initially denied entrance to Moscow University because the Jewish quota (2 percent) was full. In 1963, in the

midst of graduate work, he was abruptly sent to work in a factory for three years. Eventually he obtained a research position at the Institute for Theoretical Physics, but he was fired after he declined to sign a petition against a fellow mathematician accused of anti-Soviet activities. Now branded anti-Soviet himself, he was not allowed to defend his doctoral dissertation in Moscow but later managed to do so in Leningrad — although his writings were rarely published.

By 1975, worn out by the constant accusations that he was a traitor, Weisfeiler de-

cidated he had no future in the Soviet Union and applied for an emigration visa to Israel. He left Moscow in March 1975 carrying two small suitcases filled with books and papers, a couple of his favorite science fiction books, a stamp collection, some Russian souvenirs — and the backpack filled with hiking equipment.

After stays in Vienna and Italy, he reached the U.S. in June and was promptly hired at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies; a year later he accepted a full professorship at Penn State. He began to travel to Hungary to visit his aged father. The last time Olga says she saw her brother was at Gyula's funeral in April 1984.

Olga says she still nurses the faintest of hopes that Boris may yet still be alive, "although in what sort of mental shape, who knows? I have sacrificed my privacy and the privacy of my children to get to the bottom of this," she says, getting choked up. "But I am not sorry. I love my brother. He was a good and decent person. He didn't deserve his terrible fate and I won't rest until the full truth is known." ●



CHILEAN POLICE ON GUARD AT THE RENAMED VILLA BAVIERA: Author Basso believes Weisfeiler may lie buried in a secret cemetery behind the colony

Kornbluh, of the non-profit National Security Archive in Washington D.C., whose group was instrumental in the declassification project and is actively involved in the case, managed to get a story about Weisfeiler's disappearance into The New York Times last May. For another, a book is about to be published on the case in Chile (*see box, previous page*).

There's been a query from Hollywood about a movie, she adds, without elaborating. (The story of Charles Horman, executed in September 1973, in the first days of Pinochet's rule, was filmed by Costa-Gavras in 1982's Oscar-winning "Missing.")

Also, earlier this year, a Chicago-based law firm, Winston & Strawn, volunteered to press the case in American courts. According to attorney Alene Shafnisky, her firm is currently petitioning the government to "try to determine why little or no