

U.S. Presses Case of Missing Professor

U.S. Skeptical About Chilean Police Claim That He Drowned

July 1, 1986

By Bradley Graham
Washington Post Foreign Service

SANTIAGO, Chile—Boris Weisfeiler, a Soviet Jewish emigre who became a U.S. math professor, traveled to Chile in December 1984 telling friends he was taking another of his distant solitary hiking trips.

He disappeared 10 days later, vanishing in the remote and rugged backlands of southern Chile, near a colony founded by German immigrants and alleged by Amnesty International and others to have housed a torture center.

The police insist Weisfeiler drowned while apparently trying to cross the turbulent confluence of the Nuble and Los Sauces rivers.

U.S. officials here do not believe that story. Nor does the former Chilean judge who had charge of investigating the case. Nor does the president of the Chilean Mathematics Society, who wants the judicial inquest reopened.

They and others suspect one of two things: either Weisfeiler, who was 43 years old when he disappeared, is still alive and being held captive somewhere, possibly in the German colony; or he was killed by unknown assailants, perhaps the police themselves, who may have mistaken him for a leftist guerrilla or spy.

The case has become an obsession with some American officials, who remember the movie "Missing," based on the true story of an

American journalist abducted and killed in Chile at the time of the 1973 military coup. The film, hinting at American complicity in the murder, portrayed the U.S. Embassy in Santiago as doing little to help the journalist's family find out what happened.

"When I came, I was determined not to become the subject of a sequel," said Jayne Kobliska, who took over as consul here several months before Weisfeiler disappeared.

Implausible governmental explanations, inconsistent police testimony and circumstantial evidence have all cast doubt on the death-by-drowning explanation. Among the most curious facts: Weisfeiler's

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body was never found, although police units, Army patrols, firemen and Navy frogmen combed the area. If Weisfeiler did drown, putrefaction should have driven his corpse to the surface.

Until now, U.S. officials were reluctant to discuss the case, hoping that Chilean authorities could be persuaded through unpublicized contacts to reexamine their version and allay suspicions. But U.S. queries—including a recent one made through an intermediary to Rodolfo Stange, head of the national police force and a member of the ruling four-man junta—have produced what American officials describe as unsatisfactory and, at times, contradictory responses.

"The more we were put off, the more determined we became," said Kobliska.

Because the embassy and Chilean courts lack the manpower to do their own extensive investigating, U.S. officials are still hoping to elicit the cooperation of senior police officials. But the case is close to mushrooming into a serious irritant in already strained U.S.-Chilean relations.

Weisfeiler taught math at the Pennsylvania State University campus in State College, Pa., where he settled in 1976. He has published numerous articles on his mathematical speciality of group theory.

Airline records show the teacher departed New York City on Dec. 24, 1984, taking LAN Chile flight 141, which landed in Santiago the next day. He spent Christmas Day traveling south by train and stayed the night in the small town of Los Angeles, according to staff at the Alcazar Hotel there.

On the 26th, Weisfeiler went by bus to Antuco, then headed north on foot across a hilly, rocky, desolate zone where tourists, even adventurous naturalists, rarely venture.

Weisfeiler's closest friends in the United States say it was in character for the reserved bachelor to head for such a wilderness. "He was the kind of person who loved to wander around by himself in deserted areas," said Boris Katz, who teaches math at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and studied with Weisfeiler in Moscow.

On earlier trips, Weisfeiler had gone trekking in Alaska, Nepal, China and Peru. "He wouldn't usually have a precise plan," said David Kazdan, another friend from Moscow and now a professor of mathematics at Harvard University. "He would arrive, look at his map, then decide where to go."

Peasants in the region in which Weisfeiler was hiking often are suspicious of visitors and are under strict police instructions to report all strangers.

Nevertheless, a shepherd befriended Weisfeiler on the afternoon of Jan. 3 and offered the American, who spoke little Spanish, a place to bunk for the night. As a token of appreciation, Weisfeiler gave the shepherd, Jose Lopez Benavides, some chocolate and a piece of fishing equipment.

Lopez's younger brother, Luis, not having been told of Weisfeiler, spotted him from a distance on Jan. 4 walking north along the Nuble River, wearing heavy boots and olive-green clothing resembling military fatigues. Luis Lopez reported the outsider to the police, who watch for exiled Chileans or foreign leftists trying to slip into military-run Chile from Argentina across the nearby border.

Hastily, Jorge Cofre Vega, the sergeant in charge of the police unit at El Roble, and two others took off on horseback in search of the apparent intruder. Months afterward, Cofre told an investigating U.S. vice consul that he had assumed the stranger was an "extremist."

Cofre has said he and his associates never found Weisfeiler but did discover footprints in a sandy patch close to the joining of the Nuble and Los Sauces rivers, where the sergeant maintains Weisfeiler drowned. No one else who subsequently inspected the site saw the prints, and exactly what time Cofre came across them is unclear, given conflicting police reports.

Near where Weisfeiler is said to have drowned is a cable-car crossing. Why didn't Weisfeiler use it? And why would a hiker as experienced as Weisfeiler have risked a solo crossing in waters he knew were dangerous—having forded the Nuble River on horseback with some difficulty and with Jose Lopez's help earlier in the day?

U.S. officials and Chileans who

have studied the case have dismissed the possibility that Weisfeiler committed suicide, purposefully disappeared or was killed by thieves. A farmer named Aladino Segundo Contreras found the professor's green knapsack on Jan. 14 or 15, about 1,800 yards downstream from where Weisfeiler reportedly drowned. It was on the bank of the Nuble River opposite from the one Weisfeiler had supposedly left to enter the water.

The knapsack's contents lay scattered on the ground, but nearly everything that Weisfeiler is known to have been carrying was still there—including a sleeping bag, tent, clothing, shoes, medicines, Chilean currency, Visa charge card and return airplane ticket to the United States. Only Weisfeiler's U.S. passport, which listed the Soviet Union as his place of birth, and possibly some U.S. cash, were missing. How much U.S. money Weisfeiler had with him is not known.

About 10 miles north of where Weisfeiler allegedly drowned begins an expansive estate belonging to Colonia Dignidad, a secretive community established 25 years ago by German immigrants. The colony is accused by Amnesty International, a 1976 United Nations report, two repentant secret police agents and several persons who say they were imprisoned there of having been a center for the torture of political prisoners.

Colony spokesmen and the Chilean government, which has maintained close ties with the enclave, deny the accusation. Officially termed a "beneficent and educational society," the community runs a large, sophisticated and well-guarded farm and has its own school and clinic. Its leader is said to be a former Baptist pastor, Paul Schaffer, who fled West Germany with members of a religious community and children's home after he came under investigation for allegations of sexual abuse of minors.

Could Weisfeiler have accidentally trespassed on Colony grounds and been taken prisoner? Was he seized by the police or others and taken there for interrogation?

Sgt. Cofre, in his initial testimony before an investigating judge on Jan. 31, 1985, mentioned a military patrol from Concepcion on maneuvers in the area where Weisfeiler



BORIS WEISFEILER
... Soviet emigre "loved to wander"

disappeared. No further reference to the patrol appears in subsequent police statements.

The police waited 10 days after the knapsack was found to report Weisfeiler's disappearance to the criminal court in San Carlos, which took charge of the investigation. The acting judge at the time, Gilberto Cornejo Rivas, now a private attorney, suspects police officials of knowing more about the case than they have admitted.

Kazdan, the Harvard professor, has not given up hope that Weisfeiler is alive. He imagines that his friend, who sometimes lost his temper when tired, may have quarreled with the police if they did catch up with him.

"Let's suppose he was arrested," said Kazdan in a telephone interview. "It could be he is being held somewhere. Why then would they say he is dead? Because if they were to free him, they would have to explain why they had arrested him."

Several months after Weisfeiler's disappearance, Sgt. Cofre and three other policemen who had been at the El Roble station were transferred to other precincts. A fifth policeman in the unit retired last August.

Ricardo Baeza, president of the Chilean Math Society, said in an interview that his organization is ready to petition for a reopening of the judicial inquest, which was suspended in March 1985 for lack of further evidence. U.S. officials have asked Baeza not to file suit until additional private approaches can be made to the government.

The U.S. Embassy has hired a well-known Chilean criminal lawyer, Alfredo Etcheberry, to pursue the case. Said Consul Kobliska: "If Weisfeiler's alive, we want to find him. If he died, we want to know why."