



MUSEO
SITIO DE MEMORIA
ESMA



HISTORIAS SIN OLVIDO

In the Officers' quarters where the Clandestine Detention Center of Torture and Extermination set up in the Naval Mechanics School operated. There were more than 700 places of illegal detention during the last dictatorship from 1976 to 1983.

Here, in the ESMA approximately 5000 men and women were detained or missing. They were members of political parties or social activists, revolutionary organizations either armed or unarmed, workers, trade union members, students, professionals, artists and members of religious orders. Most of them were dropped alive into the ocean.

Here, in the ESMA the Navy planned abductions and systematically carried out murders. Here, prisoners were kept in hoods and shackled. Here, they were tortured. Here, the Navy made them disappear.

Here, in the ESMA children were born in captivity and were separated from their mothers. Most of them were illegally adopted or robbed. We are still looking for many of them.

Here, in the ESM a crime against humanity was perpetrated.

**memory,
truth &
justice**

ESMA MUSEUM AND SITE OF MEMORY Former Clandestine Centre for Detention, Torture and Extermination

The ESMA Museum and Site of Memory will remain closed until further notice as a preemptive measure against the spread of Coronavirus in our country.

Contents not suitable for children under 12.

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Schedule group visit: institucionalsitioesma@jus.gov.ar



Argentina **unida**

Secretaría de
Derechos Humanos



Ministerio de Justicia
y Derechos Humanos
Argentina

THE FIFTH PHOTOGRAPH

VÍCTOR BASTERRA. THE VALUE OF HIS TESTIMONY

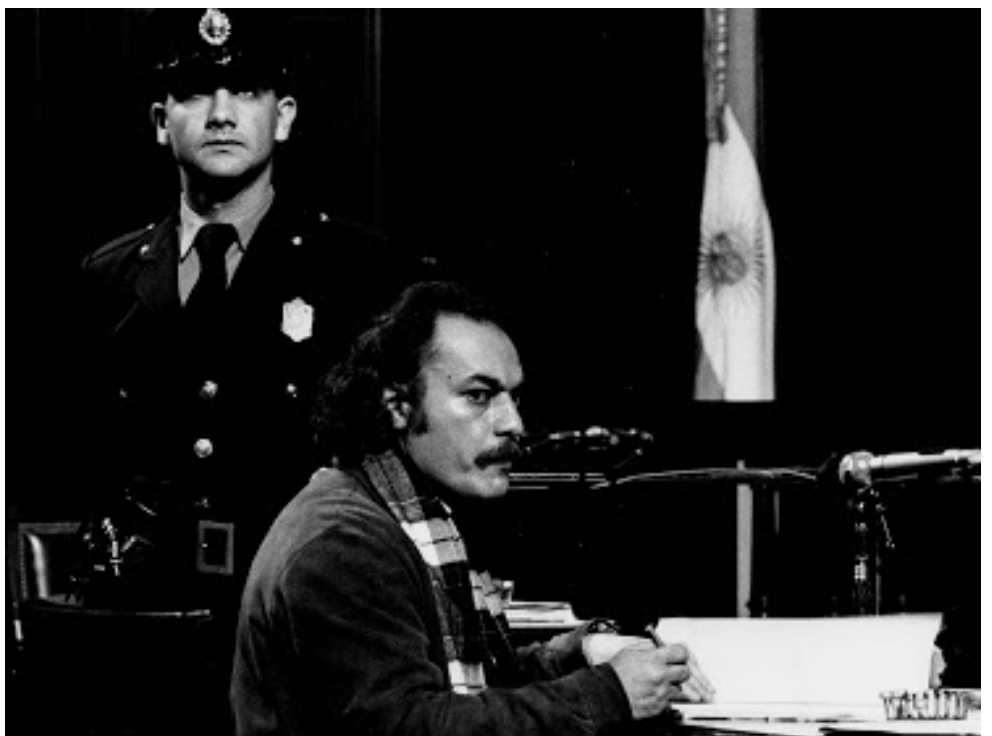


On August 10th, 1979, Víctor Melchor Basterra (1944–2020) was kidnapped along with his wife Dora Laura Seoane and their 2 months and 10 days-old daughter María Eva Basterra Seoane from their home in Valentin Alsina by a Task Force, and taken to the clandestine center that operated in ESMA. A few days later, his wife and daughter were released, but he would remain kidnapped for more than 4 years.

By January 1980, the country's ID system had changed; ID cards were going to now feature the security system used for exchange values. Because of his knowledge as a graphic worker in exchange values, Basterra was lowered into the Basement and forced to perform slave labor in the Documentation sector. His task would be to produce false documents for the members of the Task Force, who used them in their repressive and clandestine actions. He learned from other abductees to falsify the required documents: ID cards, driving licenses, police IDs, and also press badges, gun licenses from RENAR (the National Firearms Registry), helmsman licenses, and passports, among others. On January 17 of that year, he was allowed to start going out for family visits, like many other kidnapped people who also performed slave labor. These trips consisted of going to the place home where his family accompanied by one or more members of the Task Force, staying there for a few hours and returning to ESMA. Not only the kidnapped person but also their family members were being watched by the Task Force, a situation that discouraged any attempt to escape.

Between late 1980 and 1981, Basterra had started to save a series of materials, but he still did not know what he would do with them, or how to get them out, since there was a lot of control in the family outings. When he had to make up false documentation for a member of the task force, he would take a photograph of him. Usually, he had to make 4 copies for each document, and then he handed the photo negatives and the 4 falsified documents. But he made a fifth copy, and hiding from the guards, started hiding them one by one inside boxes of photosensitive paper, which he knew were never checked, so as not to damage the expensive material with light.

By the end of 1980 the repressors began to gather photographic material in a burlap bag, planning to burn it later. So, Basterra, in an oversight by the guards, grabbed a bunch of those negatives, among which he found his own photograph and those of several people who had been kidnapped on similar dates to his and were captive along with him. Also, pictures of kidnapped people who had been in ESMA some time before him. Almost all of these people are still missing. These photos were generally taken after interrogation under torture and were part of personal files for each abductee. The Navy never produced those files during the trials, despite their existence



had been confirmed, based on a photograph Bastera also took of one of them and was able to rescue from ESMA, although not the original file.

During those years he was also able to photograph lists of kidnapped people, which he found in Task Force folders when he was not being watched. In 1983, he pretended to test a new flash the Task Force staff had bought, but he put film inside the camera and took 3 pictures inside the basement, showing one of the basement stairs behind a bulkhead, a paper shredding machine in front of the access doors to the rooms where detainees were kept and tortured, and the door to the "egg carton".

As time went by, the searches he was subjected to during his outings started to relax, as well as the modality of the visits: he went by himself to his house and in order to return he made a call from a bar located on Correa and Av Cabildo, and a vehicle came by and took him back to ESMA. Some time later he had to walk straight to the ESMA entrance gate. In any case, they continued to control him, and when he came back they used to tell him that they had spotted him in this or that place. However, between 1982 and 1983, Bastera took advantage of this situation and began to methodically extract photographs, negatives and documents from ESMA hiding them in boxes of photosensitive material, his genitals and clothes. When he got home, he would hide them inside a hole in a closet without his family knowing. While being captive and following the outings routine he also met two people who had been captive along with him and had already been free for some time: Norma Cristina Cozzi and her then-husband Héctor Piccini, who also hid part of this material in his home and in a locker located in the Xerox company offices where Piccini worked.

On December 3, 1983, a week before the inauguration of Raúl Alfonsín and the return to democracy, Bastera was released. Yet he continued to receive surprise visits from his torturer Jorge Manuel Díaz Smith at his home in José C. Paz until August 1984. His neighbors had warned him that every time he went out, he was being followed.



In 1984 Bastera decided to submit all the material he took from ESMA. In May of that year, he presented the material to the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), which had its headquarters at the General San Martín Cultural Center, in the city of Buenos Aires. In July, he agreed with his wife to travel to Neuquén with his daughters to keep themselves safe

in the house of his sister-in-law. Once they were there, Bastera returned to Buenos Aires and contacted the Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS) where he shaped his testimony, which became known as the Bastera Report. In August, he filed suit against his captors in the Investigative Court No. 30, under Judge Juan Carlos Cardinali; also in that month, the photographs of Task Force members and of the ESMA Basement were published in La Voz newspaper.



He presented all the material as evidence the day he testified in the 1985 Trial of the Juntas for more than six hours, with writer Jorge Luis Borges present in the courtroom. Afterwards, in the 90s, he gave his testimony in Spain before Judge Baltasar Garzón and in the trials for crimes against humanity committed at ESMA, which were resumed after the repeal of the impunity laws starting in 2007. He also testified in 2019 in the Counteroffensive Trial for crimes against humanity committed in Campo de Mayo, as he had seen missing people from that clandestine center detained at ESMA. Thus, he complied with the task his colleague Enrique Ardeti, who is still missing today, had asked him to do back when they were both kidnapped at ESMA: "Negro, if you manage to get out of here, don't let them get away with this." ♥