

Missing

A Penn State math professor disappeared in Chile 18 years ago. His sister continues to search, fearful that he might be dead, but even more afraid that he might be alive.

On Jan. 14, 1985, Olga Weisfeiler waited in Moscow for a call from her brother. Boris Weisfeiler was a 43-year-old professor of mathematics at Penn State, a Russian-born U.S. citizen with a penchant for long, solitary hikes in empty country. He had backpacked alone in Siberia, Uzbekistan, Alaska, the Canadian North, and Peru. Olga didn't understand why he always had to hike alone. Once, after trekking in remote Canada, he had alarmed her with stories about bears and animal bones. "Animals are not dangerous," he said. "People are."

On Christmas Day 1984, Boris had flown to Chile for a few weeks of hiking near the Argentine border. He had prom-

ised to call his sister around Jan. 14, once he was settled back into State College. When the 14th elapsed with no call from him, Olga was not too concerned. Then the next day passed with no word. She says, "I waited couple of days, then I began to call him. Telephone didn't answer."

Eighteen years later, Olga Weisfeiler still does not know what happened to her brother. Chilean authorities eventually declared that Boris had drowned trying to cross a shallow river, but the story has several implausibilities, and no one has ever produced a body. Meanwhile, evidence has accumulated that Boris did not meet an accidental death. Declassified documents indicate he was apprehended by a Chilean army patrol that either killed

by Dale Keiger

him or turned him over to Colonia Dignidad, a mysterious settlement of immigrant Germans that has been accused of serving Augusto Pinochet as a detention and torture center.

Boris Weisfeiler is the lone American citizen among the 1,198 *desaparecidos* who vanished in Chile during Pinochet's 17 years of repressive rule. The U.S. State Department regards his disappearance as an open case. Olga Weisfeiler has done everything she can imagine to find him. She has enlisted the aid of U.S. senators and representatives. She has appealed to the American Jewish Congress, Amnesty International, the Committee of Concerned Scientists, the Human Rights Program of the American Association for the Advancement of

Science, the Chilean Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. embassy in Chile, the Chilean embassy in the U.S., Penn State, and mathematicians around the world. She has traveled to Washington and Santiago looking for help. In Chile she gave interviews, met with human rights investigators and activists, and published a public appeal in Chilean newspapers. She is haunted by the possibility that her brother is still alive. "I sincerely wish he didn't live through this horror," she says. "But we don't know, and I need to know. I need to be sure."

Olga lives with her 20-year-old daughter Anna in a rented house in Newton, Mass. On every shelf, on every wall, in every nook of the house are artifacts from Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Peru: vases, urns, pitchers, figurines, many of them brought back for her by Boris. Olga has a round face, high cheekbones, and graying wavy hair, and most looks like her brother around her eyes. She is 59 years old and often limps these days, or confines herself to her sofa, after a 1995 auto accident that injured her neck and left her on total disability. She speaks English with a Russian accent and syntax, but with full command. She learned after she immigrated from the Soviet Union in 1988.

She pulls out a Lord & Taylor gift box, which has a vibrant red rose printed on its top. Inside are hundreds of documents declassified by the U.S. government in 2000. Some of them say that her brother is dead. Others say he was still alive more than two years after his disappearance. What is not in the Lord & Taylor box is a single definitive word on what became of Boris Weisfeiler.

When he came to the States in 1975, Weisfeiler brought two small suitcases, containing mostly papers and books, and a knapsack stuffed with hiking gear. "He came without money, without anything," Olga recalls. "But the moment he left Moscow, he started to help family." He sent back books, clothes, things that Olga could sell for cash to help her get by in Russia. He would call home and talk to his mother. A paralyzing stroke had left her unable to speak; she could only cry into the phone.

He was first hired by the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton. A year later, he accepted an

Weisfeiler had been warned that backpacking alone in Chile might be dangerous. His reply: "This makes it even more interesting."

offer to join the faculty at Penn State. George Andrews, Evan Pugh professor of mathematics, recalls, "When Weisfeiler was hired, we in the department regarded this as a real coup. He had a very substantial international reputation." His research was mostly in algebra. In State College he lived in an apartment in Toftrees and liked going to movies, reading, and playing with his friends' children. He became a U.S. citizen in 1981. Olga says, "He was exceptionally proud to be an American, and felt protected by having an American passport."

When he decided to go to Chile at the end of 1984, he told a mathematician friend, David Kazhdan, "I want to wander, relax, and not see anyone." The mother of another colleague had relatives in Lima, Peru, and warned Boris that Chile might be dangerous for a lone backcountry traveler. He replied, "This makes it even more interesting."

Here is what is known about Weisfeiler's trek in Chile: He arrived in Santiago on Christmas, then traveled to Los Angeles, a city about 360 miles to the south, and spent the night at the hotel Mariscal Alcazar. He apparently intended to hike north until he was in the mountains well east of the town of Chillan, then head west to San Carlos before returning to Santiago. On Jan. 3, a farmer named José López Benavides encountered him 18 kilometers from the confluence of the Nuble and Los Saucos rivers. López invited Weisfeiler to spend

the night at his house; Boris gave him chocolates, tea, and fishing lures as gifts. The next morning, the farmer helped Weisfeiler cross to the north bank of the Nuble on horseback, and noticed that the mathematician seemed experienced at crossing rivers. Later that same day, José's brother, Luis, who was herding oxen, crossed Weisfeiler's path. Luis went to the police in nearby El Roble to inform them of an unreported foreigner in the area. The local constabulary appeared alarmed. Two, possibly three, police set off on horseback to look for Weisfeiler. They found nothing, they later reported, but a single set of bootprints ending at the bank of the Los Saucos.


For several months, all that Olga knew was that Boris was missing. "It seemed that nobody could do anything," she recalls. "I had no information." She kept calling friends of his in the States, and in March, three months after his disappearance, learned that the Sociedad Matemática de Chile had hired a private investigator named Oscar Durán. Durán filed a report that repeated the story of the police search and the footprints leading to the river, and described the recovery of the backpack, which Durán said had been pulled from the water by a fisherman. Missing from the pack were Weisfeiler's passport, his return plane ticket, his camera, and some currency.

In Moscow, as soon as Olga read Durán's report she was suspicious. She says, "Was very strong impression that he did not investigate. He just come to police and ask questions." And there was a peculiar sentence in the report: "The possibility that Dr. Weisfeiler entered Dignidad Colony [sic] can be discarded since it is more than 100 Km. from the place where he was last seen." If it was so far from Weisfeiler's last known whereabouts, why was



Weisfeiler apparently spent about a week backpacking north from the city of Los Angeles, Chile. He was last seen crossing the Nuble River, near its confluence with the Los Saucos River.

Jane Shasky, previous page: © 2003 David Binder

	1984	1985	
	Dec. 24–25 Penn State math professor Boris Weisfeiler, 43, flies from State College to Santiago for a solo hiking trip in Chile.	Jan. 3 A farmer encounters Weisfeiler near the confluence of the Nuble and Los Saucos rivers and invites Weisfeiler to spend the night at his house.	Jan. 4 Weisfeiler crosses the Nuble on horseback. The farmer's brother encounters Weisfeiler and reports him to the local police. Police look for Weisfeiler, but report finding only a set of bootprints ending at the edge of the Los Saucos River.

Courtesy of Olga Weisfeiler

Colonia Dignidad mentioned at all? And what was it? Olga did research and became alarmed. Colonia Dignidad had been founded by German immigrants in 1961. It was a secretive enclave of about 300 people living on 37,000 acres secured by a high fence and patrolled by its own armed security force. She found references to its founder, Paul Schäfer, as a former Nazi.

But from Moscow, where she remained caring for her mother, Olga could do little. She could not approach the U.S. embassy without getting herself in trouble with the Soviet authorities, and the embassy never contacted her, though papers later revealed that it had been notified by the State De-

partment of Boris' disappearance. She learned that in June 1985, the Penn State math department had made a Freedom of Information Act request for documents pertaining to the case. The State Department took 15 months to declassify the information released by the embassy. One of the documents, an embassy memo dated April 10, 1985, noted that the boundaries of Colonia Dignidad were more extensive than previously believed: "Thus, at the time of his disappearance Weisfeiler was either on or very near to the Colonia property." The declassification prompted then-Penn State president Bryce Jordan and members of the math department

to write letters requesting a more strenuous investigation. The Penn State chapter of Amnesty International collected 3,740 signatures on a petition demanding action. But no significant action was forthcoming.

By late 1987, Olga's mother had died and her son Lev was approaching the age of military conscription. She decided to emigrate. She and her two children were granted permission to leave the Soviet Union in February 1988, and she came to Newton, a Boston suburb. She had a Ph.D. in microbiology and an M.D., but to get a job as a research assistant she downplayed her credentials, claiming only a B.S. and M.S. She began to learn English and looked for anyone who might help her find her brother. She applied to the newly formed Chilean Truth and Reconciliation Commission to have her brother's disappearance investigated. Three years later, the commission, which was established post-Pinochet to investigate human rights abuses during his rule, turned her down because, according to a letter from the U.S. State Department, "The Commission has determined that the evidence provided was insufficient to support the conclusion that his disappearance was caused by agents of the Government of Chile." In October 1992, a Pennsylvania court declared



Boris in 1981 on the day he received his American citizenship: "He felt protected by having an American passport," Olga says.

Courtesy of Olga Weisfeiler

© 2003 David Binder

Boris "presumed deceased."

"I always felt I'm not doing enough," Olga says. "Something should be done. But what?" She wrote to her cousin Svetlana, who was still in Moscow: "It is always with me, and it follows me everywhere. Sometimes I am trying not to think about it. But I often have scary thoughts, that Boris is alive, somewhere in Chile, in that Nazi's camp behind barbed wire, and that I did too little, not enough to find him and free him. It's always the same dead end, an emptiness that is spreading inside of me."

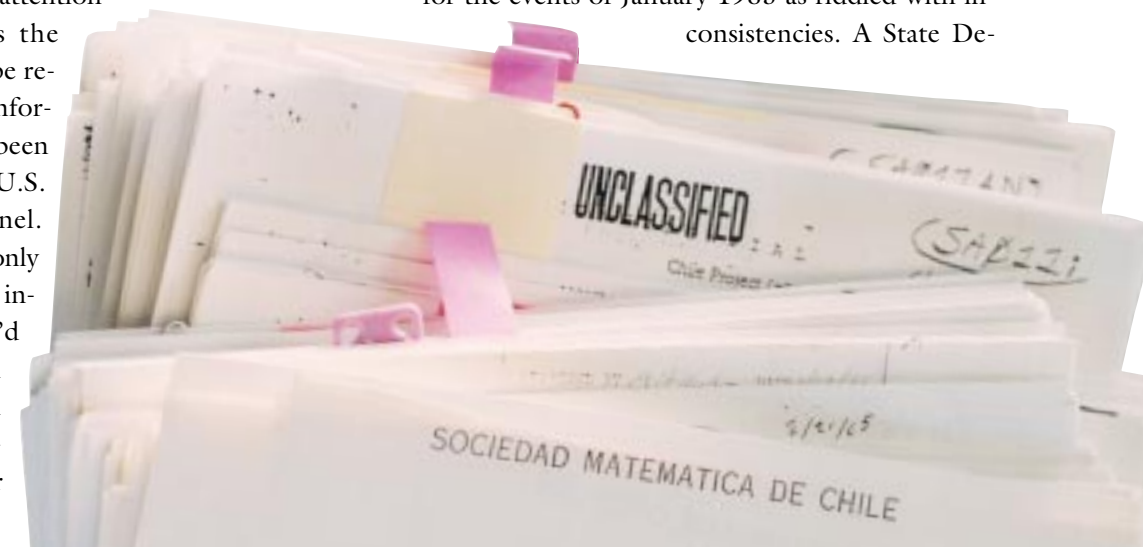
Augusto Pinochet surrendered power in 1990. In 1999, the Clinton administration ordered the declassification of U.S. documents related to human rights abuses in Chile. Nearly two years later, a FedEx driver came to Olga's door and delivered a box. Inside were 250 documents that pertained to her brother. She sat on her sofa and began to read. "I read probably a week, over and over again. I didn't see much in beginning. I even skipped some parts. Then I came to 1987, and I start to make notes."

What got her attention from 1987 was the summary of a tape recording of an informant who had been interviewed by U.S. embassy personnel. Later identified only as "Daniel," this informant said he'd been part of an army unit that in 1985 was patrolling the perimeter

of Colonia Dignidad: "When we came to a place where there were two rivers, the patrol came across a man with a backpack.... [T]he officer-in-charge 'classified' subject as a 'Russian spy' and a 'Soviet.' ... We then took off his shoes, tied him up and took him into Colonia Dignidad where he was turned over to the Chief of Security for Colonia Dignidad.... When the officer came out of the interrogation area he said that subject was not a Soviet or CIA but a 'Jewish spy.'" The informant claimed that on two later occasions, he had seen this man alive making adobe bricks inside the camp. And there was one more thing. "Daniel" had recently learned "from an ex-member of [unintelligible] that subject was still alive after two years."

Olga says, "I was shocked, mostly about how embassy knew and did not find him, did not save him. I slept two, three hours a day, eating nothing, cried, and read documents over and over again day and night, before I understood situation."

Among the documents were cables and memos that described the local constabulary's explanation for the events of January 1985 as riddled with inconsistencies. A State De-



1985	1987	1988	1990	1992
<p>January Olga Weisfeiler, Boris' sister in Moscow, becomes concerned when she doesn't hear from him. She begins making calls to friends of his in Boston.</p>	<p>Spring Bryce Jordan, then-president of Penn State, and faculty in the math department write letters requesting that members of Congress press for an aggressive investigation of Weisfeiler's disappearance.</p>	<p>February Olga Weisfeiler emigrates from Moscow, settles near Boston, and continues to lobby officials in the U.S. and Chile for information about her brother's whereabouts.</p>	<p>Feb. 6 In response to requests from the U.S. embassy in Santiago to hire a Chilean attorney to work on Weisfeiler's case, a budget officer for the U.S. State Department cables the U.S. embassy to say, "At present time there are no funds available ... for this project."</p>	<p>October A Pennsylvania court declares Weisfeiler "presumed dead."</p>
<p>March The Sociedad Matemática de Chile hears of Weisfeiler's disappearance and hires a private investigator, who learns that Weisfeiler's backpack had been recovered. The investigator also mentions Colonia Dignidad, reputed to be a detention and torture center for Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet.</p>	<p>June The Penn State math department makes a Freedom of Information Act request for documents pertaining to the case.</p>	<p>April 10 The consul general of the U.S. embassy in Santiago sends a memo to the chargé d'affaires noting that, when Weisfeiler disappeared, he was probably on or very near to property belonging to Colonia Dignidad.</p>		

partment memo stated that contrary to the Chilean private investigator's report, Boris' backpack was not soaking wet when found, but dry and free of any signs of submersion in the river. Olga found a Feb. 21, 1985, embassy memo: "Amb. [James Theberge] said the one thing that bothered him about closing the file on the case was that one hint that W. was alive." So the embassy had "one hint" that Weisfeiler might be alive, and had done what in response? Not much, as far as Olga could tell. An April 1986 memo from consul general Jayne Kobliska said, "If Weisfeiler is still alive and is being held captive somewhere in Chile (probably in Colonia Dignidad), widespread publicity could be the best means we have of saving his life." A year

Three people who were among the last to see Weisfeiler have since died under mysterious circumstances. In one case the official explanation was suicide.

later, Kobliska complained, "The 'Mickey Mousing' around we've done on this case with [the Chilean] government is disgraceful and though I think forcefulness should have been applied a long time ago, it wasn't."

Finally, there was a heartbreaking exchange of cables beginning March 1989, when the embassy requested funds to "engage a knowledgeable local attorney" to petition the Chilean authorities for an investigation. On February 6, 1990, a State Department budget and finance officer wrote, "At present time there are no funds available ... for this project."

Olga has read the contents of the Lord & Taylor box uncounted times, and she's sure of some things. She is sure her brother, a careful, experienced hiker, did not drown attempting to ford a river. She is sure someone took him prisoner and turned him over to Colonia Dignidad, a place she sardonically describes as "not best place for Soviet Jew." She is sure the U.S. government failed to do all it could to find him. The government wants to protect its intelligence sources, she believes, "and don't care about life of American citizen." Her suspicions are endorsed by Peter Kornbluh, a senior analyst at the non-governmental National Security Archive who has spent more than 16 years investigating human rights abuses in Chile. Kornbluh asserts that "a massive cover-up of U.S. documentation and knowledge of this case has taken place."

Olga perseveres as best she can. She has written to the current Chilean army commander and to the defense minister. She has set up a Web site (www.weisfeiler.com/boris). In September 1998, she hired a Chilean attorney to petition for a formal investigation. In January 2000, a judge ruled that such an investigation was warranted. For a time, the case was under the jurisdiction of Juan Guzmán Tapia, the jurist in charge of investigating human rights abuses under Pinochet. Guzmán put genuine effort into the case, but the case has just been transferred to another judge. Chilean journalists have worked the story, as has the *New York Times*. Gary Mullen, chairman of the Penn State math department, has written to members of the U.S. Senate and House, seeking information. The Committee for Concerned Scientists has established a legal fund. Lawyers in Chile and the States, including **Alene Shafnisky '94 Lib** of the Chicago law firm Winston & Strawn,



© 2003 David Binder

Olga Weisfeiler at her home in Boston. "Boris' disappearance is always with me," she says. "It follows me everywhere."

have taken on the case pro bono. Kornbluh describes desk officers in the human rights bureau of the State Department as having been "incredibly supportive" within the last few years, and says, "I think there is a quiet and steady effort to try and work with the Chileans to resolve this case." The U.S. has offered to lend FBI assistance to the investigation, but the Chilean government has not responded.

Kornbluh accuses the Chilean military of "stonewalling, refusing to turn over names and documents that I think quickly would lead to resolution." In 1986, Luis López Benavides, the herder who reported Weisfeiler to the police, was found hanging from a cable-car bridge that Weisfeiler may have tried to use to cross the river; the official explanation was suicide. In July 2001, the Chilean publication *País* reported that two of the Army patrolmen who allegedly took Weisfeiler into custody had died under

mysterious circumstances. Colonia Dignidad remains nearly impervious. A Chilean journalist who has investigated the colony, Pascale Bonnefoy, says, "Its leaders have an extensive network of accomplices and contacts among local police, judges, and political supporters who feed them confidential information about the investigation, and more importantly, when the police are going to raid the place." Chilean authorities have been inside the fence a few times in the last five years, searching for Schäfer, Colonia Dignidad's founder, who is wanted on charges of abusing boys in the colony. One of these searches, in September 2000, turned up a file labeled "Boris Weisfeiler." Inside was the supposedly confidential report from Oscar Durán, the investigator hired by the Chilean mathematicians in 1985. It had been annotated in German.

Olga Weisfeiler pulls out photo albums full of her brother. She knows which pictures were taken when he was on his treks, because he never shaved while in the wilderness. She often points to a photo of him on the day he became a U.S. citizen. He is holding gifts and a small American flag, and he's smiling broadly.

She thinks about documents that refer to Boris as having been tortured and kept in "animal-like conditions," and she says, "If he is still alive, I imagine him in so bad physical and psychological condition that he not even know where he is or what his name." Meanwhile, she says, she is "waiting. Waiting for lawyers. What I can do more?" She is frustrated, convinced that everyone—the U.S. government, the Chilean government, Penn State—could be more responsive to her entreaties. Time keeps slipping away, and where, she asks, is there any action beyond the writing of letters? Why can no one breach the gates of Colonia Dignidad and search for him?

She has feared that he is dead. Now she fears that he is still alive. Colonia Dignidad has a lot of computers, she says. It would find useful a man with her brother's mind. "I cannot talk or think about anything else," she says. "I am still have trouble sleeping. I wake up in middle of night. Okay, I have nice house, nice bed, nice white sheets. What does he have? He is alive. He is there." ■

Dale Keiger is a senior writer at Johns Hopkins magazine.

1999	2000	2001	2002
<p>February The Clinton administration declassifies U.S. documents about Weisfeiler's case. Among the papers is a summary of an interview with a Chilean army informant who reports helping seize Weisfeiler near the perimeter of Colonia Dignidad in 1985 and turning him over to the colony's chief of security.</p>	<p>January A Chilean judge agrees to allow a formal investigation into Weisfeiler's disappearance.</p>	<p>September Chilean authorities go inside Colonia Dignidad and find a folder labeled "Boris Weisfeiler," reinforcing suspicions that Weisfeiler is—or was—in the colony's custody.</p>	<p>July A Chilean publication reports that two of the soldiers who took Weisfeiler into custody in 1985 later died under mysterious circumstances. Chilean attorneys agree to represent Olga pro bono.</p>
			<p>April The Chilean defense minister pledges full cooperation with the continuing Chilean judicial inquiry.</p>
			<p>December Olga Weisfeiler goes to Chile to meet local police, judicial and governmental officials, and the U.S. ambassador. Two Congressmen and a Senator send new letters insisting on a thorough investigation. Olga hopes to travel to the gates of Colonia Dignidad.</p>