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 promised 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...
him or turned him over to Colonia Dignidad, a mys-
terious settlement of immigrant Germans that has
been accused of serving Augusto Pinochet as a de-
tention 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 disappear-
ance as an open case. Olga Weisfeiler has done ev-
erything she can imagine to find him. She has en-
listed the aid of U.S. senators and representatives.
She has appealed to the American Jewish Congress,
Amnesty International, the Committee of Con-
cerned Scientists, the Human Rights Program of the
American Association for the Advancement of
Science, the Chilean Truth and Reconciliation Com-
mission, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. em-
bassy 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 hu-
man 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 ev-
er-y 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 immi-
grated 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. gov-
ernment 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.

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 Sauces River.

When he came to the States in 1975, Weisfeiler
brought two small suitcases, containing mostly papers and books, and a knap-
sack 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, so 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
offer to join the faculty at Penn State. George
Andrews, Evan Pugh professor of mathematics, re-
calls, “When Weisfeiler was hired, we in the depart-
ment 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 Toffrees and liked going to mov-
ies, 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 danger-
ous 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 Christ-
mas, then traveled to Los Angeles, a city about 360
miles to the south, and spent the night at the hotel
Mariscal Alcázar. He apparently intended to
hike north until he was in the mountains well east of
the town of Chillán, 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 Sauces rivers. López invited Weisfeiler to spend
the night at his house; Boris gave him chocolates,
te, 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 riv-
ers. 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, possi-
bly 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 Sauces.

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 im-
pression that he did not investigate. He just come
to police and ask questions.” And there was a pecu-
lar 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

1984  
Dec. 24-25  
Weisfeiler flies from  
Penn State math professor  
Boris Weisfeiler, 43, flies from  
State College to Santiago for a  
solo-hiking trip in Chile.

1985  
Jan. 3  
A farmer encounters  
Weisfeiler near the confluence  
of the Nuble and Los Sauces  
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  
lack for Weisfeiler, but report  
finding only a set of bootprints  
ending at the edge of the Los  
Sauces River.

}}
Olga did research and became alarmed. Colonia Dignidad was 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 Department 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 then 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 “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.”

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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.”

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>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. 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. 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. June: The Penn State math department makes a Freedom of Information Act request for documents pertaining to the case.</td>
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<td>1987</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>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.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>October: A Pennsylvania court declares Weisfeiler “presumed dead.”</td>
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Olgas has 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.”

In 1998, Olga went to the Chilean authorities to petition the Chilean authorities for an investigation. On February 6, 1990, a State Department desk officer wrote, “At present time there are no funds available for this project.”

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 Mouse’ 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.”

Olgas hopes to travel to 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 compartments 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.

Olgas Weisfeiler pulls out photos 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, “He is still alive, I imagine him in such 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?

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