

Spain looks back at dark chapter of adoptions

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SARRIA DE TER, Spain -- As Antonia Radas left school one day in 1945, a cheerful third-grader growing up as a beloved only child, a stranger greeted her with shocking news. The little girl was not who she thought she was.

"I am your brother, and I have come to take you back to mother," Radas, now 70, recalls the man saying. He looked to be 19 or 20, and wore khaki military garb with a white cape; she was in the crisp gray uniform of her parochial school in Spain's Canary Islands.

Radas did not believe him, insisting she had no siblings, and stayed put. But that man was in fact her elder brother Jose.

It would take decades for Radas to learn the truth about her past: that she was one of perhaps thousands of child victims separated from their parents toward the end of the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War and its immediate aftermath.

The ordeal of Radas and others is now putting Spain under pressure to take a closer look at a dark chapter of its past. Historians say government archives show that the right-wing regime of Gen. Francisco Franco waged a campaign to take away children of their enemies, Republican prisoners, and sometimes stripped women of newborn babies. The goal was to educate the children to shy from leftist thought, embrace Roman Catholicism and support the regime.

As part of an unprecedented ruling last year that accused Franco's forces of crimes against humanity, Spain's best-known judge, Baltasar Garzon, called for an investigation into the cases of people known as "the lost children of the Franco regime." He complained that "in 60 years they have not been the subject of any investigation whatsoever."

The judge ultimately bowed out of the case in a dispute over jurisdiction. But now he is pressing provincial courts to move ahead with a probe. So far the provincial courts have not responded, but under Spanish law they are obliged to do so, said Fernando Magan, chief counsel for the Association for the Recovery of Historic Memory.

"In the end, the Spanish justice system will have to give us an answer," Magan says.

Ricard Vinyes, a contemporary history professor at the University of Barcelona, says many children were either offered up in adoption to pro-Franco families or placed in children's homes run by the state or the church, or encouraged to become priests or nuns.

Parallels have been drawn between Spain's trauma and that of Argentina's "dirty war" in the late 1970s and early '80s, when hundreds of children were taken away from dissidents and raised by military families or others that supported the ruling military junta.

Firm numbers are hard to come by. Vinyes says in Spain's case no one knows how many adopted children were not told about their real families, but certainly there are Spaniards out there who even today do not know their true origins.

State records from 1943 show that more than 12,000 children were in state or church custody, according to Vinyes, and that about 80 percent of them had been in prison with their parents. Some were reunited with them. Many were not.

Vinyes says Spain's historical archives are in a deplorable state, and governments since Franco's death in 1975 have shown little interest in investigating the civil war era.

"By ethical imperative, it is up to the state to encourage a policy of historic memory," Vinyes says.

But Cesar Vidal, a conservative author and historian who has written extensively about the war and the Franco regime, denies any widespread push to take children away from imprisoned leftist parents.

"I think there were probably cases, but very isolated ones and under no circumstances was it systematic," Vidal says.

In Radas' case, her father was on the run as a suspected Republican sympathizer, and she shared a prison cell with her mother as a toddler. Her mother, Carmen, surrendered custody of her to a fellow prisoner about to be released because she feared Franco's forces would take Antonia away.

The plan was for Carmen to reclaim Antonia in six months when she herself got out. Instead, the other prisoner immediately gave nearly 3-year-old Antonia to a couple who could not have children. The couple adopted her, giving her their last name.

In the sad and chaotic course of war, Radas' biological father surrendered and was executed in prison. Antonia's mother failed to be released on schedule, and was flown to another jail in another Spanish city. Once she did get out, she had no money or papers to travel and look for her daughter. The adoptive family was not pro-Franco, Radas says.

Other cases, like that described by Antonio Prada Giron, were more nefarious.

Prada Giron, now 69, says his mother _ the sister of a well-known Republican fighter _ had a baby boy taken away from her just weeks after his birth in 1941 or 1942 in the northern city of Salamanca. Prada Giron's brother Jesus was removed at a hospital, and all trace of him was lost.

"I think they gave him to a family that could not have children, a family that was probably pro-Franco or something like that because back then they did not give children to just anybody," Prada says.

His mother Emilia, who died in 2006, took the pain of that loss with her to her grave.

"I have spent my entire life with that anguish," she said in tears in a Spanish documentary about the lost children that aired in 2002. "If I loved my other children, I loved the one I did not know just as much, or even more. Because I never got to know him."

Prada Giron says when he was 8, he went with his grandmother to ask police about his brother, and officers told her to go back home or they would put her in jail. Prada Giron says that is the last formal inquiry he remembers his family making about the baby.

The cases of the "stolen children" only began to draw widespread public attention through the documentary, produced by two investigative journalists for Catalan regional television, Montserrat Armengou and Ricard Bellis.

In 2007, Spain's Socialist government won parliamentary approval of a law that condemned the Franco regime and paid symbolic tribute to its victims. It was highly divisive, however, with conservatives complaining it reopened old wounds and went against the conciliatory spirit of Spain's transition to democracy after the dictator's death. This included an amnesty for wartime atrocities on both sides.

Amazingly, even Antonia Radas' case was resolved not in court but on TV: a prime-time program on missing persons, called "Who Knows Where?"

In October 1993, her elder sister Maria, then living in the Catalonia region, appeared on the program waving a photo of Antonia in her First Communion dress and saying she had been lost during the war.

Within weeks, program staffers tracked her down in Malaga, the southern city where Antonia had married and had seven children, and soon a big reunion in Madrid was aired live. Radas was then 54 and her mother 86. "Good lord, did we cry," Radas says.

Mother and daughter had a year and a half to get to know each other before Carmen died in 1995.

In an interview with The Associated Press at her daughter Ester's home in this Catalan town, Radas said she had always been led to believe her mother simply gave her away.

Once they were reunited, Radas says, "I would ask her why she did not look for me. And she said she never stopped doing that for 54 years."