Chile: Memory has secret boxes

Story by Patricia Verdugo
Photography by Olivia Heussler

Organization **Corporación de Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos del Pueblo (CODEPU)**
Location **Santiago, Chile**

Three women, Paz, Viviana and Margarita, are the main characters of this story. It is a story that occurs on a daily basis in Santiago de Chile and speaks of the power of solidarity and the devastating consequences of torture. The slight stature of the women conceals the enormous inner strength that sustains them. Their smiles convey the peace they have found in providing a safe haven for fellow survivors.

December 2005. The three women are working at the offices of CODEPU in downtown Santiago. It is summer in South America and the heat has slowed their efforts. The number of people outside the organization's door has dramatically increased in recent weeks. These are the final days to apply for the payments that will be distributed to Chile's torture victims under the "Fundación Presidente Allende"[i] based in Madrid.

Viviana Uribe, Executive Manager of CODEPU, explains that, according to international law, there are four key elements to reparation. "Victims must receive fair and adequate compensation. Justice must be done. Conditions must be created to avoid repetition of the tragedy. Finally, victims must be morally acknowledged." CODEPU is contributing to this process through the registration of victims. At its offices alone, nearly 25,000 victims were registered and provided evidence. CODEPU's few workers desperately needed the assistance of volunteers.

Excerpt from the book: *Rebuilding Lives,* launched on 26 June 2006 to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the United Nations Fund for Victims of Torture. http://www.ohchr.org/english/about/funds/torture/day.htm

Margarita Durán was one of those who stepped in to help. Margarita, like Viviana, is 54 years old. To see them sharing coffee during a short break in their long and tiring work day, one would never imagine the horrors they had experienced in their lives.

Freedom from a psychological prison

Margarita Durán's nightmare began with the military coup of September 1973. Her family lived in La Legua, a popular, but economically oppressed, neighbourhood in south-west Santiago. The shelling of the tanks left a trail of dead and wounded. Her father and two of her cousins were among the thousands of prisoners taken to the National Stadium, which had been turned into a prison camp. Some days later, she and her 17-year-old sister were arrested and held in detention for several hours. It was a time of emergency for her family. The idea of taking refuge at an embassy or seeking asylum outside Chile never crossed her mind. She had to stay and help. She was arrested once again, this time with her boyfriend.

"His name was Luis, like my father. We had planned to marry at the end of 1973, not imagining that by then, we would be under a dictatorship," remembers Margarita. Instead, it was the beginning of a series of events that would leave indelible scars. The soldiers took the couple to a torture centre at 38 Londres Street, situated in the middle of Santiago, just a few metres from the colonial church of San Francisco. It was many years before she learned of its exact location.

She remembers as if it were yesterday. Her voice becomes a whisper as she chokes back tears. "I was tied up and blindfolded. When an official took the blindfold away'I saw Luis, my boyfriend. He and four other friends were hanging from a beam, with their arms wide open and their hands tied. They each looked like Christ, hanging on the cross. In front of them, the soldiers stripped me and they raped me," says Margarita.

She saw the horror in Luis's eyes and heard his shouts muffled by the gag. "I signalled to him. I think I shrugged my shoulders to let him know that it did not matter. The rape was a brutal act, but I knew that if I cried it would be worse for him and my friends. Nevertheless, he was so distraught that he collapsed, he fainted. I thought he had died. I started shouting as if I had gone mad and they stopped raping me."

Three days later she was released into bushes at the side of the road. With great difficulty, she struggled to untie herself and found her way home. The next day, she heard on the radio that five "extremists" had been killed while trying to blow up an electricity tower. Yet, in her mind's eye, she could see the five men hanging "Christ-like" from a beam.

She went to Santiago's morgue to identify the machine-gunned bodies. Luis had been shot in the forehead. With the certainty of his death, Margarita was spared the anguish of not knowing, an agony experienced by more than 1,000 families in Chile whose loved ones have been "disappeared." In the midst of her mourning she remembers the relief of getting her period. "I was so afraid I might be pregnant."

At the end of January 1974, the situation deteriorated. The Durán family moved to a safe refuge, but relatives and friends of the family were tortured until their whereabouts were disclosed. Taken to the centre at 38 Londres Street, Margarita was tortured with multiple blows and electricity. She was raped in front of her father. “My father is 85 years old and has never been able to talk about what happened.” She does not remember the physical pain of having electrical current applied to her nipples, vagina and mouth. “I only know that I shouted, asking them to kill me.” The family was then moved to Tejas Verdes, a concentration camp, where spiders and mice were also used in torture.

Murders and disappearances of her family continued. Burdened with this pain, Margarita went into exile, first to Argentina, then to Canada. She was married and had a son, yet acknowledges the traumatic impact her experiences had on her sexual life. “I never managed to talk to my husband about what happened. When I reacted badly he would say over and over again that he was not my torturer and that I had to separate things.” Ultimately, they divorced.

Once democracy was restored in Chile, Margarita returned to begin the long and difficult process of recovery. She found psychological help at CODEPU and gave testimony on television. She then testified at an appeal hearing related to Luis’s murder. When two of the torturers of 38 Londres Street (General Brigadier Miguel Krassnoff and Colonel Marcelo Moren) were found guilty, Margarita had a vision of a large metal gate opening widely. Her therapist interpreted this as Margarita’s liberation from her psychological prison.

Now a warm and smiling volunteer at CODEPU, Margarita explains that she sees her son as the main reason for her sense of renewal. “I was living in limbo, nothing really mattered to me. But my son made me aware that I had given birth to someone who had the right to be happy. I told myself that I could not inflict on him so much pain, so much sadness. As a mother, I was responsible for my actions. I decided to change and I have managed it.”

Hunting torturers

Viviana Uribe says that the process of reparation for torture victims was reactivated following the 1998 arrest of General Pinochet in London on the basis of a Spanish extradition warrant. Until then, the former dictator retained a stronghold on Chile. Following the transfer of power to democratically elected Patricio Aylwin in 1990, General Pinochet maintained his position as commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces. In 1998, he took up a lifetime appointment as Senator in the Chilean Senate.

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“When they saw Pinochet arrested and accused of torture and murder, survivors realized that they were living evidence against him. The nightmares, fears, pain and crying returned. They recognized that their half-hearted expectation that justice might be done had somehow become possible. They saw themselves as ‘subjects of law’ and realized that the time had come to do something about it. Victims expressed mixed feelings of euphoria over Pinochet’s arrest, depression over their powerlessness, and regret at not doing enough to bring about justice.”

CODEPU, formed in 1980 during Chile’s dictatorship, was immediately overwhelmed by the number of requests for psychological and legal assistance. The eight staff members had to multiply their efforts. At the height of the demand, 120 staff members, including lawyers, doctors, psychologists, teachers, investigators and documentalists, worked at the organization.

When the transition to democracy began in 1990, the State established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (also known as the “Rettig Commission”) to investigate the murders and disappearances of dissidents. In 1991, President Patricio Aylwin offered an apology to the victims and their families on behalf of the State. Economic compensation, including health benefits, was provided.

At the same time, a slow and difficult legal process was initiated to identify those officers responsible for the atrocities. General Pinochet took every opportunity to obstruct the course of justice, refusing to provide necessary information and establishing a code of silence among his officers. Until the end of 1998, the State unsuccessfully attempted to break that code to determine the whereabouts of the disappeared and to secure justice for those who had been murdered. Torture victims were consigned to silence. General Pinochet’s arrest triggered a new dynamic for victims.

Viviana explains, “In 2001, 44 victims initiated legal action for torture they had suffered in the War Academy of the Air Force. As judges became sensitized to the issue, they instructed the Legal Medical Institute of Chile to issue reports on the matter. This was followed by a lawsuit relating to the torture inflicted by the Tejas Verdes regiment. It only took one victim to provide the name of one torturer. This led him to provide the names of others, as he saw himself trapped. That’s what led to the first confrontations between torturers and victims.”

After taking steps to confront the criminals, and once victims received medical certification regarding their physical and psychological injuries, they could begin the painful healing process, one that Viviana began years earlier. Her husband was murdered. Her sister and sister-in-law were “disappeared” and she was tortured before going into exile. “Everything is within me,” she says serenely.

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Viviana's strength is drawn from a decision to face the issue head on. Her first goal was to look for the disappeared. She and her friend Erika Hennings, also a victim, obtained the cooperation of two women, former political prisoners who became Directorate of National Intelligence (DINA) informants after they had been psychologically broken by torture. The objective of their project was to map the repression and its perpetrators. They began by tracing the names until they found their addresses.

"They looked at us and said, 'they have arrived,' as though they had been waiting for the victims to find them. Other torturers were surprised and held their heads in their hands in disbelief. We begged them to help us find our disappeared. We even went to a prison to speak with one of the most vicious torturers, Osvaldo Romo. We left the place vomiting," she remembers.

She knows that memory can contain secret boxes. For many years, she was unable to recall the face of her torturer and rapist until one day in court. She saw a man walking in the hallways of the court and was unable to control the nausea. "I started to vomit and realized it was him." His identity was subsequently confirmed by the judge.

A conspiracy of denial and silence

Step by step, with tremendous difficulties, the Chilean Government finally recognized the need to appropriately address issues faced by torture victims. In 2004, an eight-member National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture was formed at the request of the President. While the Commission received the testimonies of more than 35,000 survivors, it is estimated that a similar number of victims felt unable to speak to State officials about their experiences. The Commission's 'Valech Report' paved the way for economic and moral reparations. When President Ricardo Lagos received the thick report on torture practised by the State at 1,132 sites, he stated, "So we might never live it again, so we will never deny it again."

Torture victims were given space in the media in 2004. However, once the Valech Report was made public (excluding the list of torturers prepared by the Commission, which was declared secret) and Congress authorized compensation for victims, the issue disappeared from the political agenda. Nevertheless, cases against Pinochet continued to impact on the victims. CODEPU responded to the release of the report by registering torture survivors who had not previously submitted their testimony.

It has been a long and arduous journey, as Dr. Paz Rojas, neuropsychiatrist and president of CODEPU, is well aware. Dr. Rojas began helping torture victims in November 1973. At that time, she volunteered with the Comité Pro Paz (created by several churches) and, together with other doctors, established a clandestine clinic to assist the first prisoners to be released.

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Ten months later, she was forced to leave the country as a result of threats of capture from the secret police (DINA). In France, she continued to assist victims in exile. When she returned to Chile, she became a member of CODEPU and in 1983 she received backing from the UNVFVT for the project “Reporting, Investigation and Treatment of Victims of Torture and their Relatives.” The experience of Dr. Rojas over the past 30 years has been instrumental in the training of new therapists.

The Greek origin of “trauma” means “wound.” “Torture trauma,” notes Dr. Rojas, “represents the extreme cruelty of human beings against other human beings, their relatives and society as a whole. The experience leaves victims without words to express what they have lived through. There is no language and what prevails is denial and silence.”

When words finally emerge in therapy, they are merely descriptive. As Dr. Rojas notes, “victims cannot communicate what cannot be told, the trauma in their lives.” Their silence masks the feelings of guilt that they have survived while others have not. “To a certain

Who decided it and why?’ To the victims’ silence we must add the silence of a society that denies the presence of the survivors, since accepting it would entail accepting the existence of extreme evil. This denial probably responds to the ancestral need to hide cruelty as a human phenomenon.”

In 2000, General Pinochet was stripped of parliamentary immunity and the Supreme Court of Chile upheld an earlier decision that there were sufficient grounds to prosecute him. In 2002, the Court ruled he was mentally unfit to stand trial. Several years later, a United States Senate investigation found General Pinochet had millions of dollars hidden in foreign accounts, leading to charges of tax evasion and corruption. In January 2006, he was ruled mentally fit to stand trial by the Supreme Court and again stripped of his immunity in a human rights case. This vacillation between justice and impunity has affected the well-being of victims.

Meanwhile, human rights work in Chile carries on at full steam. The work of women like Margarita Durán, Viviana Uribe and Paz Rojas provides hope for those attempting to heal their wounds, mitigate their pain and seek justice and appropriate forms of reparation. More importantly, this work provides a source of hope that we can prevent another tragedy.

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[i] In 2005 the Foundation received $9 million (USD) in a settlement from Riggs Bank after the bank acknowledged it had assisted former dictator Augusto Pinochet in hiding millions of dollars, despite a 1998 Spanish judicial order to freeze his assets.