

Sewing memories: Arpilleras, sites and memory Valparaíso

Allende and the CIA

On September 11th, 1973 - our September 11th and I do not say this with pride - the dreams and longings that thousands of Chileans tried to carry forward with the help of the "*Unidad Popular*" and President Salvador Allende, the first democratically elected socialist leader in the world, were frozen. That day, a part of the Chilean population began to write one of the saddest pages in our history and, in which the role of the United States was fundamental but not exclusive.

As some of you know, Chile was ruled for 17 years by a "*junta military*" commanded by army general Augusto Pinochet, who over the years became its most visible leader and then president of Chile. The other members of this junta were the generals of the air force, the navy and the police. What was initially considered a military dictatorship was soon understood as a "civic-military dictatorship" since in the 17 years that they were in power many civil supporters of the government were given important positions, both political as well as in intelligence.

In those years, a Chile in dictatorship was not the exception in Latin America, since every country on the continent, sooner or later, had been taken over by members of their military. And many, if not all, were educated in the United States in prestigious military schools such as "*La Escuela de las Américas*" (Latin American Training Center-U.S. Ground Forces). Testimonies, investigations, and finally declassified CIA archives revealed that not only in Chile but also in the rest of the continent, coups d'états had the logistical and economic support of the United States. As an example, declassified U.S. State Department documents show that within days of Allende's democratic triumph in 1970, President Richard Nixon ordered the CIA to "make the economy scream" in Chile to "prevent Allende from coming to power." The CIA acted on this threat.

During the Cold War, Allende and the *Unidad Popular* proposed to reach socialism through democratic elections, in many ways a one-of-a-kind experiment in the world. Their program of government envisaged the construction of a People's State and an economy based on a strong role for the state. Agrarian reform, and the nationalization of copper (our main natural resource), and large companies and banks are some of the major changes that the government program carried out during the thousand days of the *Unidad Popular*, the coalition of political parties that carried

forward Allende's candidacy. However, supported by the CIA, the economic powers, the media, the right-wing parties and far-right movements such as *Patria y Libertad* (Homeland and Freedom) fiercely opposed these changes and were, from the beginning, a fundamental pillar for the establishment of a military dictatorship in Chile. Once democratic means to destabilize Allende's government had failed, these different actors from the Chilean right, in some cases funded by the CIA, conspired together to end the democratically elected government by force.

Dictatorship and repression

From the first minute, the military regime was characterized by its cruelty. Pinochet embarked on a policy of mass extermination of the left-wing groups or "Allendists". Initially, this task was in the hands of a secret police agency called "DINA" (National Intelligence Directorate) until 1978. Following a controversial and deadly car bomb attack against Allende's former minister, Orlando Letelier and his US secretary Roni Moffit on September 21, 1976 in Washington DC, the CIA decided to end explicit support to the dictatorship. These events forced Pinochet to transform DINA into the "CNI" (National Intelligence Center), which operated in the same way as DINA until the end of the dictatorship in March 1990.

Both secret police organizations were made up of military and civilians who committed brutal and systematic violations of human rights. Thousands of people were incarcerated in improvised prisons, including football stadiums, schools, universities, boats and abandoned houses that, in some cases, were stolen from the same prisoners. People were brutally interrogated, tortured, and many were executed. Many others are still missing, even today. There were mass raids on those living in working-class neighborhoods, job layoffs, school layoffs, and attacks on civilians intended to sow terror. Hundreds of Chileans who sought refuge in foreign embassies were exiled.

Economically speaking, a new model was imposed, radically opposed to the Allende project. As Naomi Klein writes in her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Chile became the quintessential experiment for a new "neoliberal" economic model in the world, with consequences still felt to this day. Just as we previously talked about members of the Chilean military who were educated in U.S. military schools, now we talk about an educated elite receiving scholarships to attend the University of Chicago's famous school of economics. These disciples of Milton Friedman, the "Chicago Boys,"

were pro-dictatorship civilians who were given the important task of implementing this new economic model in our country, a model that Pinochet welcomed with open arms.

The consequences of implementation were very negative for the population. There were few restrictions on the market, and everything was put up for sale, including our educational system, healthcare, pensions and our natural resources. Today Chile is the only country in the world that has privatized all natural water sources, with our rivers traded on the stock market. The unemployment rate also soared, wages fell, businesses went bankrupt, and job opportunities declined. In short, the lives of the poor were made more precarious and social inequality increased considerably. All this in addition to the terror exercised by military and civilians in charge of the country who imposed this new regime with blood and fire ("a sangre y fuego" in Spanish), leaving thousands of victims in its wake. The *National Valech Commission* (named "Valech" from the last name of the president of the commission) ultimately recognized more than 40,000 victims between 1973 and 1990. Around 3225 people were killed by agents of the state, of whom about 1200 are still listed as missing detainees. The *Rettig Report*, prior to the Valech report, certified 307 cases of people under 20 executed, including children from six months to adolescence. Seventy five cases are of children missing in detention. In addition, records of 1168 sites were collected that were used as detention facilities.

In response to these policies of repression and severe violations of human rights, countless social groups emerged that raised their voices firmly and clearly against what was happening. As Patricio Orellana and Elizabeth Hutchison write in their book "The Human Rights Movement in Chile 1973-1990," these organizations derived from three main sources: churches, the family and later political parties.

Unlike the absent role of the churches in the current rebellion resulting from their lack of legitimacy, during the Pinochet era they were of vital importance. The churches acted through different human rights bodies such as the "*Comité pro Paz*" (Pro Paz Committee), which would later be called the "*Vicaría de la Solidaridad*" (Vicariate of Solidarity), "*SERPAJ*" (Peace and Justice Service) or "*FASIC*" (Foundation of Social Aid of the Christian Churches), among others.

The family is another critical institution that generated human rights organizations, because of the need to find justice for relatives who were arbitrarily detained, tortured, killed or "disappeared." Thus was born the "*Familiares de detenidos desaparecidos*" (Group of Relatives of Missing

Detainees), the *“Familiares de prisioneros políticos”* (Group of Relatives of Political Prisoners) and later, the *“Familiares de ejecutados políticos”* (Group of Relatives of Political Executed).

Several years later, starting in 1978, human rights institutions linked to political parties such as the *“Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos”* (Chilean Commission on Human Rights) and *“CODEPU”* *“Committee for the Defense of People's Rights”*, emerged. These organizations worked closely together and their task was not easy because when united they became a threat to the dictatorship, exposing to the whole world the crimes against humanity that were happening in Chile. This commitment to the defense of human rights had high costs as many members of these organizations were persecuted, imprisoned, tortured and even killed, while others were expelled from Chile with a ban on re-entering the country. These severe consequences illustrate the difficult task of creating the essential human rights movement in Chile.

Women and repression

Women militants, social activists - and any woman who had shown a glimpse of political participation - lived through their own flesh the crudeness of repression, often through gender-based violence. This violence against women ranged from psychological mistreatment simply for being a woman to the use of sexual violence in order to degrade, humiliate and dehumanize. The military state and its supporters committed systematic violence using the woman's body and sexuality as a simile of the Chilean people. They even used enclosures especially for this type of torture such as the well-known *“Sexy Venda”* or *“Discotéque”* where torture was exerted to the sound of music and also, in several cases, with dogs trained for rape. In this regard, a former female political prisoner declared to the Valech Commission:

“I got pregnant and miscarried in jail. I suffered electric shocks, foot and hand hangings, submarine, drill shooting, cigarette burns. I was forced to take drugs; I suffered rape with dogs, the introduction of live rats through the vagina and all the body. I was forced to have sex with my father and brother who were in detention. I was also forced to see and listen how my father and brother were tortured. They made me the phone, they put me on the grill, and they made me cuts with a yatagan in the stomach. I was 25 years old.”

Of the total testimony received by the National Commission on Political Prison and Torture between 2003 and 2004, 12.5% were for women. These were the women who lived the brutal repression directly, but of course it wasn't the only form of punishment. Many women lived the pain, the anguish, the humiliation through the injustices that were committed against their own families and friends, and their loved ones, mainly men since the repression of the dictatorship had a clear male component. Data from the 1996 National Truth and Reconciliation Commission indicate that the majority of victims are men, possibly because of the low participation in the social, political and employment sphere of women at that time.

How arpilleras are born

The popular and political art of arpilleras was born in this time of injustice as a relief for women who sought out their husbands and relatives who had been imprisoned or disappeared. They are born as the essence of the Pro Paz Committee, an institution created by Chilean churches because of the urgent need to protect people's lives. Subsequently, at the end of 1975 and under pressure from Pinochet, the Committee had to be closed; however, after January 1976 it was transformed into *Vicaría de la Solidaridad*, an institution that depended directly on the Catholic Church.

Valentina Bone, who started the first arpilleras workshops, recounts in the documentary *Periódico de Tela* of 2007 that women arrived at the Committee very distressed after seeking answers in hospitals, in prisons, in the morgue. They came to this place that provided them with legal help and at the same time it became the center where the relatives of the persecuted, detained and disappeared met, to give moral support and assistance. In the midst of this reality begins the first workshop that Valentina directed in the Committee, so these women began to tell their stories and the stories of Chile in pieces of cloth, using remnants of old clothes and wools of woven vests. There were horror stories in these arpilleras, hiding behind the bright colors and naive figures. The artists worked from sadness and denunciation, from waste and poverty and loss.

These same women were also surprised at what they could represent in their works, of what they achieved by telling their stories. They were harrowing stories, they were the forbidden photographs of reality that probably no official history has yet in their records, arpilleras showing torture centers, forms of torture, solidarity lunch centers, funerals, repression and pain. Lots of pain.

During these years, many foreigners arrived at the Comité pro Paz and then the Vicaría de la Solidaridad and, after seeing these poignant works, they were interested in buying them. At first, it was very difficult for women to sell the arpilleras, as they had an emotional attachment to them but they needed the money to support their families. Thus, they felt they had an obligation to sell them. By doing this, however, they told the whole world what was happening in Chile. Over the years Valentina and other arpilleras trained thousands of women who transformed their work into a testimonial tool to publicly communicate and denounce the violation of human rights suffered by both themselves and their loved ones in Chile. Thus, the arpilleras became a form of resistance and social struggle and at the same time a form of union and emotional connection amongst the survivors.

The great Violeta Parra, Chilean folklorist and singer-songwriter, years earlier had already intensely expressed her inner world and her emotions through her colorful arpilleras. In her fabrics she also embroidered the memory, embroidered her life, the legends and folk tales, her visions of the country and the history of the world in which she lived, although her technique was very different. She used "jute" or "arpillera fabric" as it is known in Chile and the images were embroidered with brightly colored wool directly on the cloth. As she explained, "I do not know how to draw and I do not draw anything before I start my tapestries but I gradually see what I have to sew. I fill in spaces on my tapestries. I strive to show the Chilean song, the legends, the lives of the people".

It should also be noted that the technique of the arpilleras, with different variants, has been used throughout Latin America in different eras, but always with the idea of portraying in the fabric a piece of history parallel to the official history built by the political power that has excluded stories of pain of the poor, of women, of peasants and others who were marginalized. For example, I have seen poignant arpilleras in "*El Lugar de la Memoria*" (The Site of Memory) in Lima, Perú that show the pain of families still searching for their loved ones. The Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission calculated numbers of nearly 70,000 victims among dead and disappeared detainees from 1980 to 2000.

Democracy and the Rescue of Memory

On March 11th 1990, Chile returned to democracy with the slogan "*La alegría ya viene*" (Joy Is Coming). In a major event at the Nacional Stadium in Santiago, which had been one of the main torture centers during the early years of the dictatorship, the new President Patricio Aylwin asked forgiveness on behalf of the state of Chile, at a moment when clearly there were no intentions to do justice. In the Supreme Court there were still the same judges who had been appointed by the dictatorship, who remained reluctant to investigate and sanction. In addition Pinochet remained as the commander-in-chief of the army and as a senator appointed in accordance with the 1980 Constitution, which they themselves had imposed. In May 1990, the elected president declared:

"The conscience of the nation demands that the truth be clarified, that justice has to be done as much as possible, and then come the hour of forgiveness."

This phrase, which to this day is controversial in the world of human rights, has been interpreted as a sign of impunity. Justice would be done to the extent that the Armed Forces and those who supported the dictatorship allowed it.

This March 11th will be the 30th anniversary of the return to democracy in Chile. However, our democracy has put aside the popular movement that fought so hard for that joy. Moreover, during these years, characters who were actively involved in state terrorism and who held important positions in government and the judicial system were enshrined as "democrats." Chilean democracy has been well below expectations. In these 30 years we have not changed Pinochet's 1980 constitution, and the economic system imposed by the Chicago Boys has been maintained and strengthened by all governments in democracy, including "socialist" presidents such as Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet. Special prisons have been set up with all sorts of comforts for human rights violators who have been privileged over those fighting for social justice. Few human rights violators are effectively jailed, and several have been pardoned. Our current President Sebastián Piñera is considering pardons for 15 others, among them some who have more than 200 years of sentence. After 30 years, the survivors of that horror still do not see justice in a country that instead promotes impunity and oblivion over the work of justice and memory.

Arpilleras and Memory Sites of Valparaíso

Faced with this reality of “dismemory” and injustice a group of women headed by our “maestra” María Alicia Salinas, a former political prisoner, proposed to return to the tradition of resistance, social struggle and denunciation that the arpilleristas had since the beginning of the dictatorship. This time we work on rescuing the memory of different places where human rights were violated; sites that were used as centers for kidnapping, detention, torture and extermination in the Valparaíso region. The proposal by this group is to generate historical awareness of our spaces, to integrate them into our memory, into our stories since we know, because it has already happened, that the interest of the human rights violators and their supporters is to destroy them and make them invisible. Their intention is take them out of our history.

Thus was born the *“Colectivo de Arpilleras de Sitios de Memoria Valparaíso”* in 2016 with the task of collecting a list of places and then, through research and testimonials, to capture the images in our arpilleras. These testimonies have, in many cases, been given by the same companions of the colectivo, some of them former political prisoners, and also by family and friends of our Colectivo.

From the year 2016 on, we have portrayed around 15 sites, among them in the *“Estadio de Playa Ancha”* (The soccer stadium of Playa Ancha, a neighborhood in Valparaíso) where the same morning of 9/11/73 hundreds of prisoners were transferred; the *“Cárcel del Buen Pastor”* (The Good Shepherd Women's Prison) which was guarded by nuns and where women remained imprisoned, including our partner Alicia Olea. During those years two babies were born of imprisoned mothers in this jail; the *“Cuartel Silva Palma”* headquarters that belonged to the Chilean Navy and that was used as a repression enclosure between 1973 and 1976 and that was led by the Naval Intelligence Service; the school ship Esmeralda an emblem of the Chilean navy; the Santa María University that was used as an enclosure for detention, torture and, where more than 9 tons of books were burned according to newspaper reviews of the time. And we still have many others to memorialize.

Why did we choose to express our work through the arpilleras?

I quote María Alicia in her presentation of the Colectivo from 2016:

“Because it is a tribute to our families who accompanied us during the political prison where, in addition to us, there were our relatives, our mothers and sisters, our aunts and cousins, the sister-

in-law, all the women, all who visited us and accompanied us while in prison. They didn't embroider, they made arpilleras. They were arpilleras of denunciation: they denounced closed factories, repression that was lived, and many other things..."

"We had a workshop in the "Three Alamos Prison" in Santiago with which we were looking to dignify ourselves. We needed to be self-sufficient, so we did a workshop. We were in prison but we worked and sold our products, which paid us money that, first, was for fellow heads of households who had children. And then we all had the right to decide based on our work and our needs. We value our workshop very much because it was a socialist work experience: a sign that you can build things..."

And now, to us, it seemed that it is a worthy tribute to our relatives to do a work with arpilleras, just as they worked it in the past. We decided to work memory with arpilleras".

From our collective work we have created a space for the teaching and social learning of our region's past and seek to tell the "unofficial history" of local memories. At the beginning, the Colectivo operated in the space of the *ex cárcel*, "the former prison of Valparaíso", also a detention center for political prisoners of the time, which today Valparaíso Cultural Park officially recognizes as a "Memory Site". Then, during 2017, we moved our weekly operation to the *PRAIS-Valparaíso* (Integral Health Care and Repair Program). In this place we have been able to strengthen our creative collaboration by affirming our identity as a cultural group, which evolved to what we now call **COLECTIVO ARPILLERAS, SITIOS Y MEMORIA VALPARAÍSO**.

As a group dedicated to learning, reflection and transmission of knowledge, the Colectivo is also a center of self-education, self-research, coexistence and mutual support and, indeed, is a space of contention when expressing and / or processing those painful episodes of the life experiences of those who saw, experienced and remember.

Starting in 2018, **ARPILLERAS, SITIOS Y MEMORIA VALPARAÍSO**, projected its development around the realization of visits to Sites of Memory and Human Rights, meetings and exhibition of our works, conversations, in addition to continuing the creation of arpilleras. In this way we fulfill the purposes of sharing what has been done, exchanging experiences of action around popular memory, and contributing to the imperative of developing a pedagogy of memory and Human Rights.

Current situation

Due to the social outburst that our country has lived through from October 18th of the past year, our work has been affected. The government of Sebastián Piñera, which a few days before this fact had declared, "Chile was an oasis in Latin America" declared on October 21st: "We are at war against a powerful enemy." This statement is curiously and appallingly similar to those uttered by the dictator Augusto Pinochet many years ago and, that "powerful enemy" is once again the people of Chile who, tired of the injustices that we have experienced all these years, went out into the street shouting "We are not at war, we are united." Like Pinochet, Sebastián Piñera took the military to the streets, declared a state of emergency and now we live a repression in the image and likeness of what we experienced during the 17 years of the civic-military dictatorship. Once again, serious and systematic human rights violations have been committed. These are part of the statistics of the events that occurred according to the National Institute of Human Rights as of January 15 of this year:

Within three months of the explosion more than 22,000 people have been arrested, there are about 3500 people injured by bullets, different kinds of pellets, or tear bombs. There are 405 people with injuries to their eyeballs, some with total vision loss, more than a thousand children have been arrested in jails across the country, around 200 people have reported sexual violence and there are 27 people deceased, to name a few.

For many of the survivors of dictatorial repression, this revives the pain of those years. Our partner Alicia Olea commented that "to see the current repression is to go through all the pain that we and many others had experienced during the dictatorship". As a colectivo we have also participated in this current movement, not only through our participation in marches, caceroleos and other forms of public expression, and we continue to capture in our fabrics the memory of the Chilean people. Through our work we write the unofficial history assuming our commitment from the place of those who understand its work as an act of resistance that compromises its fight against forgetfulness, impunity and injustice.

We can't and won't forget!

Long life for those who fight for a better world and dignity for all!