

SURVIVING TORTURE
TESTIMONY AT THE UN INTERFAITH SERVICE
June 26th, 2008

At the time of the fascist military coup in Chile in September 11th 1973, I was a Sociology student at the university and also a trade union leader. I was detained by the military on September 21st of that same year and taken to Quiriquina Island concentration camp; with a hood over my head I could hear the horrors around me. My daughter, only 3 months old by then, was detained with me and taken away. I didn't know **where** she was or **what** had happened to her. There is no greater horror than that. Only 1 month later I found out she was at my mother's and that she had been saved by one of my family's friends who was an officer in the Chilean Navy from being "sold" to strangers. Hundred of babies were not so lucky...

I was tortured for one week with continuous beatings, electric shocks, almost drowning, suffered of sleep deprivation, was raped by my interrogators and terrorized by dogs. I have scars of cigarette and electricity burns all over my body.

The soldiers made me face a firing squad twice shooting blanks at me. They were laughing and I... I felt I had actually died. They released me after 6 months of imprisonment because of the helping work of the World Council of Churches; Pinochet's regime sent me into exile. I lived as a political refugee with a UN passport for 10 years in Great Britain.

I went back to Chile in 1984 to contribute in the fight for democracy and social justice. The sinister Chilean secret police, Pinochet' own "Gestapo", detained me again in 1986; I was in their dungeons for 3 months where I was given what they called "the full treatment", that is to say electricity shocks, water boarding, rape, truth serum, sleep deprivation and solitary confinement. There, I witnessed the torture, death, suffering and heroic endurance of many of my friends, men and women who only wanted freedom and justice for our people.

I thank you all for this opportunity of being a witness to their struggle; it is a great honor and no matter how painful it is to remember, I am grateful because it means that they are still here, present and alive. It is a reminder of what must never happen to people just because they think, feel, and look or believe different from those in power.

I must also tell you that in the darkest of places, I chose life and that I could only do it because of the help, the compassion and love of the other prisoners who were suffering with me; and also because of my faith in God and the certainty that I was not alone. God was also there being tortured with me, imprisoned with all of us.

I was released after the Catholic Bishop of the city of Concepcion Monsignor Santos spoke on my behalf. I was never the same. I still have nightmares. I still look behind me to check if I am being followed. I still have claustrophobic episodes. I still cry for my absent friends, I still have difficulty sleeping. It is also true that I have not being able to forget nor forgive. But there

is a greater truth than that... and it is that most of us who have been tortured still believe in the goodness of Humankind, in the need for freedom and justice; we believe in the beauty of life, and in the many wonderful opportunities and possibilities it has and offers every day. We do not remain embittered and sad, but rather live every day as a marvelous and miraculous gift of God. We do not take anything for granted but rather work hard not to see other human beings go through the same terrible experience.

My friends thank you for not forgetting; thank you for your commitment to stop these heinous practices, thank you for being there in the darkness with us!

Shalom!