

## TESTIMONY OF TRAUMATIC POLITICAL EXPERIENCES: THERAPY AND DENUNCIATION IN CHILE (1973-1985)<sup>1</sup>

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(Translation Maxine Lowy)

*This article shows how clinical practices developed during the military dictatorship led to new knowledge about trauma, particularly its effect on memory. Psychologists came up with the idea to have patients write down their testimony as a central element of their therapy. Patients embraced this. The shame and rage that was eating away at them could be channeled toward denouncing what had happened and demanding justice. Things changed in the 1980s: the public began to know about what was going on and the detainees' stories found their way into the press. This »modified the place of denuncia and made the therapeutic process of giving testimony less necessary.« The last part of the work, shows the new social purpose written testimonies took on in the changing political climate of the 1980's*

### Introduction

When dictatorships and civil wars draw to a close, many countries create truth commissions to listen to the victims and reconstruct the history of human rights violations that occurred during the recent past. Thousands of testimonies that describe similar conditions lead to discovery of sites of former secret detention centers, the daily operational routine of terror at these places, repressive procedures and the sensation of dread implanted in victims and the entire society. Official recognition of what happened intensifies the demand for the state to seek justice and offer victims reparation.

In the case of human rights violations committed in Chile, even during the military regime when persecution was at its height, thousands of people denounced arbitrary arrests, torture, forced disappearances and extra-judicial

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political executions. Starting in 1973, immediately following the coup, national and international human rights agencies, courts of law, lawyers, therapists, social workers, medical doctors and journalists heard testimony from witnesses and victims of these acts of repression. After 1990, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1990-1991) reconstructed the succession of politically motivated killings and forced disappearances. Later, thousands who had been imprisoned and tortured between 1973 and 1990 testified before the Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (2003-2005).

Torture, the disappearance of a family member and surviving executions were situations concurrently political and personal that implies traumatic experiences. The repressors were agents of the state that carried out policy the military regime had defined. The people they persecuted were declared »enemies of the country« and a danger to national security.

This essay will analyze testimony of traumatic political experiences as a therapeutic tool for treating victims of torture and other human rights violations during the military regime in Chile. For our purposes, testimony shall refer to personal narratives created by people who were victims, and or witnesses of violation of her or his rights in between 1973 and 1990. In this context the testimony includes an account on detention, interrogatories and political imprisonment, but also the main aspects of her or his life before. In the cases of disappeared or executed people the narrator is usually a family member.

The first section of the essay describes the therapeutic role of testimony. The second section will analyze the social role of testimony when employed to denounce human rights violations.

## **Psychotherapy and political repression**

The approach we will describe was one of several responses mental health professionals developed to work with individuals and families affected by human rights violations. It is important to remember that the military regime came into being with a policy of mass repression against supporters of the government it had overthrown. Military rulers declared the country in a state of internal war and suspended individual rights. More than 5000 people were arrested between September 11 and 13, 1973 throughout the country and more than 18,000 were arrested in the following months. Most prisoners were brutally tortured for hours, days or even weeks. Thousands of people

fled into exile. Many were summarily executed. Others disappeared after their arrest, never to be seen again.<sup>2</sup>

This situation motivated some religious denominations to come together to create the Cooperation for Peace Committee (also known as Pro Paz Committee) in October 1973 to provide legal assistance to persecuted people. The Christian Churches Social Aid Foundation (FASIC) was founded in 1975. In January 1976, the Santiago Archdiocese's Vicariate of Solidarity replaced the Pro Paz Committee, which dissolved due to pressures and intimidation by the regime. These institutions provided legal and humanitarian assistance to people who sought help. Professionals day after day brought more confirmation of the devastating effects of the repressive policy on individuals and their families. The dire situation prompted mental health professionals to begin providing emergency care in their private practice, eventually forming a support network backed by human rights agencies. Not until September 1977 did FASIC open its Psychiatric Medical Program with psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers providing mental health care for victims.<sup>3</sup>

The people who sought assistance in 1977 and 1978 were mostly political prisoners who had been sentenced by military court (*consejos de Guerra*) and were processing the commutation of their prison sentence for banishment, or exile, under decree law 504 of 1975.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes they were given only a few short days out of prison to reunite with family before departing from Chile. In most cases, only one or two individual, family or group sessions were possible before they were forced to leave. Primarily the work consisted of group sessions called «exile orientation groups» comprised of former prisoners and their family members. Participants would talk about how torture had affected their lives. They would share their fears and uncertainties as well as the difficulties they expected to encounter in exile. Approximately 5000 political prisoners commuted prison sentences for exile under the decree law and processed their departure through FASIC between 1975 and 1980. An estimated 600 received psychological assistance (in family, group or individual sessions) from 1977 to 1980.<sup>5</sup>

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2 Ministry of Interior. National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture. *Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura*. Santiago: 2005, pp. 203-221. The figures cited correspond to respondents who testified before the Commission. The total number is probably higher.

3 See: Eugenia Weinstein, Elizabeth Lira y Eugenia Rojas. Editoras. *Trauma, Duelo y Reparación*. Santiago: FASIC e Interamericana, 1987.

4 Decree Law 504 of April 1975 allowed prisoners convicted by war councils to commute prison sentence for exile.

5 Patricio Orellana y Elizabeth Q. Hutchison. *El Movimiento de Derechos Humanos en Chile 1973-1990*. Santiago: Centro de Estudios Políticos Latinoamericanos Simón Bolívar (CEPALSB), 1991.

The disregard for individual dignity, the generalized sense of menace, as well as legal and social defenselessness affected families in numerous ways. The political prisoner had spent a long time separated from family, receiving sporadic visits under tightly controlled conditions, often with no idea about what had happened to the family after his or her arrest, and fearing for them. The family, for its part, had witnessed the arrest, and feared for his or her physical and psychological integrity. The uncertainty, fear and insecurity were compounded by confusion sowed by official accusations reported in the communications media that the parent, spouse, daughter or son, sibling were criminals who had committed heinous crimes.

The majority of former political prisoners expressed the need to vindicate their dignity and honor. Accused of terrible crimes against the nation and stigmatized as criminals, they were denied the right to defend themselves against such accusations and were deprived of basic procedural rights of a due process. Instead of recognition as protagonists and members of legitimate social and political change movements, they were accused as instigators of a criminal project.

The professionals of Human Rights Institutions observed that filing denunciations and legal actions in court to demand justice eased moral and psychological recovery. This led them to develop denunciations as part of the therapeutic process that included integral medical care, medication and occupational therapy. The paramount objective of clinical intervention was to alleviate symptoms and enable persons to reestablish emotional and social bonds, recovering control over their own life.

Patients eagerly accepted the proposal to tape record their testimony as an opportunity to create a permanent archive of their prison experience, validating that what happened to them indeed took place while contradicting official denial of the practice of torture and even arrest, despite the existence of witnesses.

The testimony process was both painful and a relief. The tape recording was transcribed and the text became the focus of several therapeutic sessions, returning again and again to the narrative, its details, emotions, sadness and sense of guilt. The testimony became a document that preserved the person's story exactly in the manner he or she wished to convey. This work method was employed primarily with former political prisoners who had been tortured, adapting it to the patients' individual needs as the therapeutic function of the testimony became clearer. In 1980 the results from the first cases were valued and a second evaluation was conducted a year

later. This psychotherapeutic experience and its results were published in following years.<sup>6</sup>

Providing assistance to victims of political repression had a powerful moral and emotional impact on everyone who worked with these people. This impact was channeled to the care and protection of the lives of persons as well as the need to denounce what was happening in courts, churches, and national and international public opinion.<sup>7</sup> Denunciations stressed the effects observed in individuals and their families, with particular emphasis on the traumatic impact that persisted over time and seeking to prevent the continuation of political repression<sup>8</sup> The denunciation was partially able to serve as receptor for the rage and violence such cases evoke not only among patients but also lawyers, therapists and human rights workers.

### Psychotherapy and memory

Psychotherapy for victims of political repression was a terrain on which professionals had not enough knowledge when they started working with victims in 1977. Some studies published around the world documented the symptoms observed in clinical settings but few addressed the therapeutic processes. Clinicians had to comb old clinical and therapeutic studies on trauma, some of them dating from the mid-19th century. Those researchers found cases of young women who had symptoms of anxiety, partial paralysis not associated with the corresponding neurological structure or sudden blindness that could not be attributed to sensory injury. These incapacitating pathologies baffled scientific knowledge of the day. The meaning of the set of symptoms was unclear, although doctors believed the behavior was related to »something mental« of emotional origin. Hypotheses for diagnosis and treatment were developed on the presumption that the »disease« had its roots in an unbearable experience that had not been processed psycho-

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6 Ana Julia Cienfuegos y Cristina Monelli. »El testimonio de experiencias políticas traumáticas como instrumento terapéutico«. In *Crisis política y daño psicológico. Lecturas de psicología y política*. Tomo 2, pp. 78-88. Colectivo Chileno de Trabajo Psicosocial, 1982 A more complete analysis was published under the title »The testimony of political repression as a therapeutic instrument,« *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. New York: January 1983, pp. 43-51. Another version can be found in Elizabeth Lira and Eugenia Weinstein (editors). *Psicoterapia y represión política*. México: Siglo XXI, 1984, in the chapter »El testimonio de experiencias políticas traumáticas como instrumento terapéutico«, pp. 17-34.

7 The military regime pressured churches to stop making these denunciations. The pressure led to the closure in 1975 of the Committee for Cooperation for Peace, which prompted Cardinal Silva Henríquez to found the Vicariate of Solidarity (Vicaría de la Solidaridad) to continue that work.

8 Ana Catalina Rodríguez de Ruiz Tagle »Detenidos Políticos, Sufrimiento y Esperanza«. *Mensaje*. Vol. 26, núm. 275, diciembre 1978, pp. 777- 783.

logically. Physicians had to find a treatment procedure that could retrieve that experience. Neurologist Jean-Marie Charcot, who worked in the La Salpêtrière Hospital of Paris in the second half of the 19th century, developed a new approach for the series of cases, looking for a way to understand and treat the pathology. Assigning great therapeutic value on remembering, Charcot utilized hypnosis that enabled the individual to »remember« what today would be known as the »traumatic event.«<sup>9</sup>

The majority of cases Charcot assisted originated from sexual abuse or other conflictive experiences related to sexuality. The overall diagnosis was »hysteria« that carried a connotation related specifically to female sexuality of these patients who were all women. Many of these women appeared to have suffered a major life-threatening experience. In those years trauma was believed to originate from a moral and psychological conflict of religious or cultural origin, associated with abusive sexual experience. The individual disassociated recollection of the experience and all significant aspects related to that experience, in an attempt to function as if it never took place. In suppressing the memory of that event, only the symptoms, in an apparently »incomprehensive« way, revealed traces of that intolerable experience.

Although the treatment's initial objective was to access the traumatic experiences and repressed emotions, the memory that surfaced under hypnosis was evoked in an altered state of conscience. Even though it unleashed intense emotions, the patient's mental state was unaltered. The subsequent impossibility of accessing the memory retrieved under hypnosis maintained the »discovery« disassociated and permanently repressed, in other words, it continued in »oblivion.«

Sigmund Freud, who had worked with Charcot in La Salpêtrière Hospital, later discounted the use of hypnosis, preferring to explore other alternatives as free association until developing psychoanalysis as a clinical practice and psychological theory in late 19th century. His clinical work with this type of case described repressed memory rescued from the depths of oblivion as key to the recovery process. He noted that catharsis associated with the recovered memory produced slight, if nearly always temporary, relief. Later he reached the conclusion that the symptoms would vanish and the relief could be lasting if the memory did not become part of the individual's self-knowledge and personal history. The person had to understand when and how the experience had threatened her existence and how the symptom »translated« the meaning of the experience, as well as the psychological defense and »negotiation« that permitted survival, required acceptance and

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9 Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery*, Basic Books, 1992. In Chapter 1, »A forgotten history«, the author extensively describes the history of clinical research on trauma dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.

working through the meaning of the experience, not only »remembering« what happened, as occurred in catharsis.<sup>10</sup>

This study was relevant for us due to the parallels with some of the situations we encountered. However, a significant difference was that the memories we sought to recover had been suppressed and totally forgotten. We were working with painful and persistent fragments of memory that tormented people every day. These were memories of a past so recent that they were not yet relegated to the past and were experienced as a traumatic present. Therapeutic intervention was conducted on living but also disassociated memories. It seemed to us necessary to remember, verbalize and name, but sometimes this was impossible: there simply were no words. However, talking and telling facilitated putting order to the chaotic and fragmented dimensions of the memory. But words and memory stigmatized and isolated victims. Few people wanted to listen and find out what had happened. Many outright refused to listen. Others became anguished, fearful and did not want to learn about it. A general silence surrounded political repression as if it only existed in the minds of the victims.

### **Testimony as therapeutic tool (1978-1982)**

Psychotherapy for victims of political repression, particularly for persons who were tortured and held prisoners several years, enabled identification of a fundamental fact: for many, political commitment had been the most meaningful axis of their lives and had played a decisive role in their capacity to resist the atrocities. That capacity to cope with the unbearable arose from the value of the ideal for which they had fought and had loved more than life itself.<sup>11</sup> At the same time the defeat the political aspiration represented a personal loss that was associated and subordinated to the loss suffered by Chilean society.

For some, the perception of defeat was accompanied by a willingness to reflect on their responsibility for the failure of that aspiration in an effort to rethink and project their life in the changed political setting that altered their place and power. Others stressed the anguish of the »death and loss« of the

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10 See Jean Paul Sartre. *Freud*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1985, p. 159 y ss. This book comprised Sartre's screenplay for a film about Freud, but the script was not used because of differences with the director of the film. It was published posthumously, entitled, »Le Scénario Freud«. Paris: Gallimard, 1984.

11 A testimony, recorded between 1975 and 1976, of a farm worker leader who had been tortured showed me the importance for a person denigrated and destroyed to situate the repressive experience in the context of his life history and moral and religious values that inspired his political choices. Elizabeth Lira. *La psicología del compromiso cristiano*. Santiago: Instituto Latino Americano de Doctrina y Estudios Sociales. Tesis, 1976. Manuscript.

political ideal as if the country's fate and their own were one and the same. The perception of irreversible loss broke down defenses and the ability to resist the life-threatening catastrophe they experienced. It was anguishing for them to concede their lack of control over many situations that affected the core of their being and that they were susceptible to more arrests or even loss of life, or would have to leave the country to protect themselves.

Moreover, repressive violence and defenselessness had produced mistrust and insecurity in interpersonal relations and with themselves. The judgment of reality was affected in many cases. Fear altered thought and basic cognitive functions, giving credence to rumors that increased the sense of insecurity.

The outlawing of Popular Unity political parties, unions and community organizations had destroyed their social network. Many lost their jobs and livelihood, becoming dramatically impoverished. The confluence of these situations made people feel overwhelmed and isolated, at the risk of internalizing what was happening to them as an insurmountable loss – and giving up.<sup>12</sup>

The therapeutic instance could be something like a truce, a space where it was possible to talk and think. For that reason, it was essential to establish a bond of trust capable of containing the pain and anger and propelling life ahead under these new and adverse circumstances.

The following selections from the testimonies of José, Pedro and Diego, political prisoners between 1973 and 1978, exemplify the possibility for working this through. All three had been sentenced to life imprisonment. At the time we assisted them, they had agreed to commute the prison sentence for exile and were about to depart for different countries that had granted them visas. They would be separated after sharing nearly five years in prison and enduring interrogations and torture together. Their testimonies sprung from a conversation among the three about the repression and its impact but also about the forced separation due to the approaching exile. They had been able to work through the repressive experience with each other during the long years of detention.

They told that they had often asked themselves, »Who am I? What happened to me? What disturbed me? What hurts? Where am I and where am I going?« The events each had experienced emerged in a brief narrative that obliquely glossed over aspects that overburdened them, but also provided, on their own admission, the keys to their survival.

The tape-recorded account was transcribed as testimony, omitting the most private and painful aspects that had been communicated in the ses-

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12 Elizabeth Lira y Eugenia Weinstein. »El testimonio de experiencias políticas traumáticas como instrumento terapéutico«. Elizabeth Lira y Eugenia Weinstein (editors). *Psicoterapia y Represión política*. México: Siglo XXI Editorial, 1984, pp. 17-34.

sions. They separated intimate and private aspects from others that were equally personal but pertained to the public and social sphere.<sup>13</sup>

José, Socialist Party member, was arrested September 30, 1973.

*I am José. I am 29 and was born in a rural area [...] I became a member of President Allende's personal security guards. Then came September 11 and everything ended. Like my comrades, I fell during an insecure situation in which we did not know what to do. [...] Many comrades decided to turn themselves in [voluntarily]. They argued that we shouldn't resist, so they turned themselves in. Four of them were annihilated a short time later. Others [who were discovered and arrested], including me, were imprisoned. Many of the ones jailed were extra-judicially executed; twenty-six were killed.*

*All the time I didn't want to turn myself in. I left home, which was a natural reaction, the instinctive thing to do. [He had hidden to avoid arrest.]. I was arrested when a police patrol swept the town and from there I was transferred to various jails, police stations, until arriving at Investigations Police headquarters. Later that same day they moved me to the National Stadium in Santiago, where I was held about forty-five days. From there I was transferred to the prison on the site of the former Chacabuco Nitrate Office. Some fifteen days later I was moved to the Calama Regiment. Well, a process began in which I had no options. I was like the man they needed but if when they interrogated me and I told them what they wanted to hear, they didn't believe me. If they had wanted to interrogate me to find out something, they would have done so, but they didn't. They interrogated me three times but only once did they ask me things; the others were just to beat me up, without asking me anything.*

*The trial came after that. They would say. [...] Well, first of all, there was no evidence to support a single fact: that I traveled to Cuba, that I went there to learn martial arts, guerrilla training – completely false. But I had no way to prove the contrary and neither could they. They knew I had been a bodyguard for President Allende but they looked for other activities aside from security, like assaults, and things that had nothing to do with it all. The War Council came after that and right away, a death sentence, signed and everything. Then someone, I believe, it was the archbishop, intervened. They lowered the sentence to life in prison. After a year and some months in prison, they moved me to Copiapó for security reasons. I spent two years and a bit more in Copiapo, a total of four years, four months and a few days. I was only free from September 11 to 30 of that year. [...]*

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<sup>13</sup> The testimonies were produced in 1978. They are compiled in an unpublished manuscript about cases assisted between 1978 and 1980.

*Our situation has been so horrendous. And look how the Junta has achieved part of what they set out to do! Here, if they don't kill in every sense of the word, they try to make each of us think there are so many problems that there can be no joy in life, that life has no meaning, when it is we who give it meaning. I think that this may very well be the achievement the Junta seeks: to reduce us to that condition where they break us. It is unfortunate, I think it's unfortunate because it shows they have accomplished what they wanted, partly, and it shows how terrible September 11 was. All organizations, all comrades were practically annihilated, and usually they fell alone. The isolation weakened the comrades; it caused them to focus on their problems, to live their problems, to reduce them to the point that they felt useless. Since we are always useful in one way or another and life always has value, it is always a joy. It all depends on us to try to find that value.*

Pedro, public employee, arrested September 11, 1973.

*My name is Pedro U. I am 30 years old. I was born and raised in Rancagua. I was jailed and recently got out. When I was out of prison, I became depressed because I »wanted to eat up the street,« to use a common expression. I got out of prison, went home to my family, was there a couple hours and then I felt like walking Rancagua from end to end. I walked and walked and walked, looking around. It was kind of strange because I was different when I left prison. It was like a shock. I was different when I got out, and felt like everything was a lie. What I saw was a lie. Later I went to Santiago and it really has been terrible to stroll along Ahumada [Pedestrian's street in Downtown Santiago]. I get the impression that I see certain automated indifference in people. Like ants that work mechanically, not consciously. Then I went home feeling tired, overwhelmed; that ant-like work overwhelmed me. It was so indifferent, so cold. And each one walks along the street, enters a store, takes a bus and someone next to them dies and no one cares. If someone begs for a handout, they could not care less. And if the newspapers say a murderer has to be convicted, they could not care less.*

*The other thing is that, for me, Santiago is like being alone. It's as if you are alone among two million people, in a place crowded with people, but you are alone. I think about the people from the provinces who come to Santiago. You get the feeling that everyone here in Santiago is pretty much alike. Downtown, people behave like robots. They have robot faces, like cadavers. The other thing is the hypocrisy when someone says, »I can't understand all this hypocrisy.« It's depressing and it's best not to think about it. If you take a look at what the newspapers write, you can tell it is clearly programmed. How can they lie like that? How can they be such hypocrites? Television news is the same thing. I*

*say, how do they feel, like persons? Do think they are making history? Do they think they are the saviors of Chile? Saviors of the country? I imagine they do.*

*Probably history will not even name us, will not notice each of us. But in a way, we are figures who participated in a historic moment, a process and at the present time we are still making history. History has not cast us aside. [...]. All our experience should be directed in that direction, to situate ourselves within our future life and within the life of this nation.*

Diego, 27 years old, sentenced to death by War Council.

*Our situation is adverse – reality is adverse, it's terrible– so it leads us to provoke a crisis inside ourselves, in our ideas, our aspirations. If we fail to understand this reality as an antagonistic element that allows us to confront our own lives, if we cannot do that, we are dead. If they take you prisoner, the world goes on just the same. When they are interrogating you, you know they are subjecting you to electric current while outside people are walking, buying in the market, whatever. In other words, it is so terrible to discover how little life means, how little importance it has. Truly, life has no importance. You give it importance when you see and express things with a bit of balance, common sense, unified criteria.*

*And I think that's very important in a marriage; it's essential. That's why the decisions the couple make, even what you want to wear or what one wants to do, no matter how trivial you think it is, you have to talk it over with your partner because that is the only thing that allows us permits us to open up more and know each other.*

*I think it is something very difficult to overcome in a marriage. It means recognizing your couple's criticism. For me my wife is first and foremost my partner [compañera]. She is the most important partner of all. I understand the meaning of compañera. I came to understand it when I was in prison. I understood it when they arrested and interrogated her. I understood when they threatened me that they would kill her, and I understood when they threatened to bring the baby, who was 4 months old, to run electric current. I understood when she went to see me in court when I appeared the first time. I understood when she came to the prison the first time and when I saw the way they frisked her, how they touched her. How she traveled there when it was raining. I understood the meaning of the word »compañera.« In other words, I didn't get it before. I knew she was, because she was with me, but I understood it, I mean, I truly understood at that moment. Above all, my wife is my partner; she's not my property.*

As a therapeutic mechanism, testimony facilitates restoration of conditions of the person's ego that were needed to undertake a psychotherapeutic process. Testimony connected the person with his feelings and gave way to catharsis. That catharsis was painful, violent and almost unreal. It could be seen as the beginning of a journey back to the past that allowed you to recognize oneself in a history one was part of even though at the moment it appeared alien in many ways.

In the therapy sessions, communication reconstructed the details of the repressive experience as well as the personal history in all its dimensions. The work of developing the testimonial document led the person to add greater depth to the narrative. Finally, it became the concrete expression of a stage of the work.

The testimony had more therapeutic value in some situations than others. Former political prisoners and survivors of torture experienced a sense of relief when they gained better understanding about how repression and torture had affected their lives and how, despite the fact that its effects would be with them a long time, paradoxically, torture was not something »personal.« The torturer and the tortured person did not know each other before. Each represented two sides of the conflict raging in society. Cruelty, the intimacy of pain and death shared between strangers and »enemies« reflected the deep conflict that existed in society that sooner or later, would return to the public arena where it had started, and where reparation of victims could really begin.

### **Survivors of execution**

The experience of people who survived execution is different from that of political prisoners. Evidently, only five survivors of execution consulted. Two were Lazaro and Maria, who sought psychological assistance between 1979 and 1980. Lazaro was a farm worker union leader of 55 years of age at the time he consulted the institution's therapeutic services. He described how he had been held nine days in a police station and later in a military base, from where he was taken out in the middle of the night to a bridge where he was shot on September 26, 1973, and thrown into the river. The bullets did not impact vital organs and, wounded, he remained in hiding in the bushes. He walked three nights until reaching his house. He remained hidden in a room for five years, in conditions of extreme poverty. He survived thanks to his family's loving care and promise from every family

member not to mention a word to anyone. Every member of his family, including his small children, kept that promise.<sup>14</sup>

*One day I learned that one of my three littlest ones – the oldest – cried and cried. He would spend entire afternoons crying because daddy had died. Then the older child would console him, »Don't cry, Coné« – we called him Coné– »don't cry Coné because daddy is not dead.« The child who consoled him was not aware that I was alive. When I found out how he cried so much, I said to my wife, »Look, I have to take a big risk because we can't let the children become ill. We have to tell them I am alive. »Then their mother brought them to the dining room and said, »Look, your father [...] is not dead. Your father is over there and soon he will come to talk to you.« She began preparing them and then she brought them over and it was such an enormous happiness. There are no words to describe those things.*

The therapy took place in October and November 1979. It involved reconstructing Lazaro's personal history, starting at childhood, union experience, his political decisions, as well as the repression he endured. The testimony was initially intended for his children. He opened his narrative with the following words:

*Ever since I was very little, I had known poverty. This may sound like a lie, but when I was eighteen I had never worn shoes. [...]. In my house there was only a cot, a single bed where my father and my mother slept. The rest of us slept on the floor on burlap bags stuffed with corn leaves [...].*

*[...] One never forgets poverty one lives through. It's even harder to forget if after thirty years of age you still see that misery in other children. You still see those farm worker peasant families who are as poor as you once were. So, you begin to think about. Who is to blame for this situation? Why does this exist? Is it true that peasants are poor because they get drunk or is it because they are not paid enough for their work? And when you begin to understand that it is not because farm workers are lazy, that it's not drinking that keeps them poor, but rather it's due to injustice, then you lose your fear of fighting. You then understand who is to blame.*

*[...] I can't recall the exact date, but I think it was in 1965, when I first spoke to a boss for myself and on behalf of other workers. I went to collect the payment owed us for 23 hours overtime. The way I say it,*

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<sup>14</sup> These cases are analyzed in the chapter by Elizabeth Lira. »Sobrevivir. Los límites de la psicoterapia«. E. Lira y E. Weinstein (editoras). *Psicoterapia y represión política*. México: Siglo XXI (Editorial), 1984.

*it sounds so easy but it was quite a risk at the time. It was like pulling a lion's tail.*

At the time Lazaro sought assistance, he and his family were trying to decide what to do with their lives. The extreme hardship of this family's life had prompted a European country to offer them visas. They were afraid to remain in Chile but they were also afraid of a forced departure into exile. The stories the father, mother and children told about what they lived through and what they had felt all that time had a cathartic effect for the whole family group. It enabled them to talk about dreams and fears and enabled them to understand the father's political commitment and the meaning of his union struggle. Despite the adversities, poverty and renewed possibility of persecution living in the rural area in dictatorship, they decided to remain in Chile.

Maria, who was over 40 at the moment of her consultation, had been mayor of a town in southern Chile during the government of Salvador Allende. On September 18, 1973 she was shot on a bridge near her house. The bullets did not graze her but she fell into the river. Her husband was shot with her and was swept away by the current. She survived in concealment in various places and officials placed some of her children in orphanages under state guardianship. Maria experienced a serious emotional disorder and loss of memory that during several years caused her to forget her name and the experience she had lived through. Therapy lasted almost two years. At first, she only remembered her arrest and execution. The segment of her testimony we cite below was recorded in January 1980, a few months after beginning therapy.

*At the police station they did not ask absolutely anything. They only asked my name and the number of my identity card (carnet de identidad). They were gentle at first but then they did raid my house and destroyed the mattresses to pieces. They ripped them open lengthwise because they thought arms were hidden in the cushion. And they opened the down featherbed. They left things in a terrible state. They didn't leave a single bed for my children to sleep on. I had featherbeds for all my children. After destroying everything, they took us away and left my children watching and crying.*

*And that shameless sergeant told my children, »Others have already cried. Now it's your turn to cry.« He said that to my little girl who was then only six years old. What could that child possibly know? What could the other girl of eight possibly know? What could the boy of 10 understand? And what could the other boy of 11 possibly know? What could they have known? Did they have ideas?*

*From five in the afternoon until twelve that night I was held in the police station. Finally a police corporal came and opened the cell, and*

*said to me, »Come out, lady.« I came out of the cell. »Go to the office.« I went into the office. They made me sign a plain, blank sheet of paper and asked me for my identification card and wrote down the number. The card was lost because they never gave it back to me. They did the same with everyone.*

*Around midnight they shot two rounds from a machine gun into the air. That was the signal for the group to pick us up and terrorize people in the vicinity. They kicked the men into the vehicle and inside they struck them with the butt of their rifles. They struck me with their rifles and threw me inside. We must have traveled about two hours. It was far and they took us down side roads to confuse us.*

Lazaro and Maria survived their executions. Both cases involved extraordinary experiences. To be defenseless in the face of arbitrariness, plunder, and impending death led Maria to condense her entire life into a single life experience, forgetting everything else, including her own identity. Poverty, persecution, fear of being found and murdered coexist in her alongside anguish whose origins she could not remember. Maria gradually developed her testimony over the course of nearly two years. Every so often, as the memories began surfacing, she would retrace and summarize them. During that period she recovered her relationship with her children and began living with them. Once she had a place to live and began filing legal action in court for what had happened to her, Maria made notable improvement.

Lazaro and Maria spoke about their lives before dictatorship and their social and political work, the failed execution, the anguish in the face of death and the subsequent fortuitous survival. They narrated each stage as part of their own life but also as if events in the distant past, disassociated, as if it not belonged to each of them. They were able to find words to tell their respective stories despite anxiety and the unreal sensation they felt when recollecting what happened. The emotional stability so arduously achieved was not sustainable on the sole basis of testimony; rather it required other therapeutic tools as well. These included social assistance to improve housing conditions, food, clothing and work. Both gained renewed appreciation for their own emotions and family life, prioritizing these among the goals they set for the future.

### **Retrospective evaluation of testimony tool**

The testimonies usually began with the individual's personal story within a family, as a human being who actively participated in community and political organizations. They would go on to sketch their political membership, career and social motivation. The denunciation of repressive events

was made in that context, placing the focus on the condition of protagonist of a political and social history of this person who had been a victim of the regime's repression. The narrative also captured the effects of torture and sufferings had on concrete persons and their families, as well as certain political groups and social networks.

More than twenty years later, it seems to me that testimony was therapeutic for those who consulted in those times. The recent repressive experience opened the possibility for exploring in greater depth the emotions associated with losses that are life-threatening and also threaten living conditions. Many lost work or home, were deprived of the right to live in one's own country, one's good name and dignity, and the right to fight for values and ideals. In addition, in placing the repressive situation in the context of the person's life and political commitment, commonly quite disassociated, strengthen personal resources, leading to a better daily coexistence within the family. A fundamental factor was the therapeutic bond that made it possible to contain such brutal, devastating experiences, until gradually restoring basic trust and the possibility of a trusted, stable and warm human bond.

On another sphere, officials denied that their regime practiced torture and political repression. Furthermore, after 1977 prisoners who were released from secret interrogation places were forced to sign a statement affirming they had been treated well and had not been tortured. Such official denials had very disturbing effects for former prisoners. The avenue to overcoming those effects was via confirmation of the truth of the facts and of what had happened to the person. This was reached through testimony that partially reconstructed the reality. The testimonial document might also serve as a means to publicize what happened without having to tell it again and again. It was a symbolic way of externalizing something that had been experienced internally and that could not be expressed in words during a long time. Some former prisoners wanted to record the experience »exactly as it happened« before it faded from their memory or with the passage of time. They wanted to record what happened »for posterity.« Unlike statements given to the truth commissions, these testimonies were processed in cadence with the psychological possibilities of each person, at the pace he or she required.

This therapy procedure had a range of effects, in addition to the ones described previously, not only corresponding to individual differences regarding motivation, life experience, and capacity for working through. A decisive factor was the need to consider the development of the repressive context and social perception of human rights violations. In the late 70s, constructing a personal testimony about a repressive experience had a much greater psychological impact than for victims after 1983. At the onset of the national protest movement, magazines opposed to the regime would denounce repression by describing cases in great detail. As more and more people read the denunciations, a broader consensus was created

in regards to the veracity of human rights violations and the need to bring an end to the dictatorship. This shifted the role of the denunciation, and the need to carefully manage the testimony as part of the therapeutic process diminished.

### **The social role of testimony and the value of the manuscript**

If reconstruction of the personal history was the initial step towards recovery of the experience for the patient, we might also note that the testimonies compiled in document form could have immense symbolic value as well. For people who could barely read and write, this value was particularly important. The manuscript played a social role because its content could be shared. Emerging from genuine recorded communication, it retained each person's language and manner of expressing themselves. Persons recognized it as a document that told his or her life story in their own words. Once transcribed, the written text enabled the individual to share the memory and experience of pain and fear with others. It could be re-read and its content developed further after therapy, possibly even by other persons than the author. The document registered the full tragedy of the past, exactly as it had been narrated, exactly as it was remembered, and therefore, in the way the narrator had suffered it. Some patients highly valued the fact that their words were »documented« for future generations, and in that way the testimony would become a historical document.

We have noted that persons who experienced a brutal, humiliating and denigrating event had great difficulty in communicating it. They feared overwhelming people close to them by telling the horrors they endured. They were afraid to be viewed as contemptible and pathetic. It was so disturbing to remember that they could not talk about it. The possibility of communicating the experience, preserving it on a tape recording, transforming it into a written text and feel that someone could consider important to listen to the recording, evoked ambivalent feelings. The thought of having to record the experience provoked fear and anxiety. At the same time, »telling« seemed to be a way to free them from the damaging, painful, humiliating memory that surfaced in their mind again and again. All the more so, when it facilitated creation of a written text describing certain extreme and brutal situations that could be employed in the judicial arena.

Some former prisoners told how in prison fellow companions who had endured the same situation would speak spontaneously and profoundly about the horror they suffered and it would bring a sense of relief that others understood and were supportive. From this perspective, the testimony was not merely a text that helped reconstruct their own story or record the past; rather, it could be used to vindicate their political commitment, social struggle, and participation in political parties and unions before dictatorship

and to recognize oneself as someone who had been persecuted for that commitment.

Whether because the testimony made it possible to objectify the experience through language and recompose fragments of personal history, or because when used as denunciation it channeled the aggression experienced, the ritual-like return to the document would modify the person's self-perception as well as his or her perception about the specific situation. The person now was able to see himself not only as victim but also as that active, engaged person he had been and perhaps could become again. This change halted the cycle of emotional deterioration in which he was submerged.

In this way, the testimony became a tool that contained a persecuted world that was no longer the product of the patients' subjectivity; rather, that reality indeed existed, despite official denial. Individual suffering could be shared with others without risk of being discredited and without obliging the person to relive the pain each time he described the story. According to the victims themselves, the testimony became »a valuable tool for denunciation« for preventing those crimes from ever being repeated. In short, it transported knowledge of the damage suffered beyond the therapeutic relationship.

### **Testimony as denunciation and its therapeutic value**

Some testimonial texts became tools of denunciation for the victims in criminal complaints against the perpetrators, filed after 1980. The narratives aided them in reconstructing the details when it came time to file legal action in court. Some patients sent their testimony to international human rights agencies (primarily UN-appointed special rapporteurs who monitored the human rights situation in Chile). Others were sent to journalists who investigated specific situations and published some in magazines and books. More than one was read in radio transmissions aimed at Chile, such as Radio Moscow's »Listen Chile.« Other victims showed them only to their children and relatives.

That testimonial documents could be used to denounce human rights crimes had great importance for the therapeutic process. The victim's hostility that originated in subjection to denigration and inhumane treatment could be redirected to »make justice,« and »set things straight« along the judicial course. Furthermore, it was through these narratives that people beyond the circle of victims began to learn who had been persecuted and what had happened to them. These were simple, descriptive, first person, even anecdotal, narratives that let the reader or the listener understand the victim through the emotions the testimony conveyed. In some cases certain information revealed the narrator's identity but other documents had changed details and places to protect the victim's identity. With the excep-

tion of denunciations sent to the United Nations and the courts, until 1984 most testimonies circulated under pseudonyms. »Accusers« took charge of dissemination of most cases and there is no means to assess distribution and impact.

### Testimonies of disappeared persons

The testimonies of relatives of disappeared people represented an entirely different situation. The first denunciations in court on behalf of disappeared persons were filed in 1974, leading to the formation of the association of relatives who carried out numerous actions to search and denounce, with the purpose of finding their disappeared family members.

Few documents were created as testimonies. The first was Ignacio Agüero's filmmaker *No olvidar*, filmed in 1979 and 1980. Mrs. Elena Muñoz and her surviving children narrate the Maureira family testimony shortly after discovery of the remains of their family member in the old limestone ovens of Lonquén. They describe aspects of their family, work histories, union activity, and the arrest of the father Sergio Adrian Maureira Lillo, and four of his oldest sons on October 7, 1973. The mother describes the search; the daughters recount its conclusion with the discovery of the bodies together with the bodies of other farm workers disappeared from the Isla de Maipo area. They tell that after the bodies were identified government officials ordered the bodies to be thrown into a mass grave in the Isla de Maipo cemetery. Their narrative ends as the daughters point out that the court case against the police officers that arrested their father and brothers ascertained how they died but the charges against the defendants were dismissed through the amnesty decree. During many years this documentary film circulated privately in Chile. The filmmakers' names were not known until after 1988.

Other testimonies of relatives of disappeared persons were published in book form under the authorship of eight women, relatives of disappeared persons, who recounted their story. Like the film *No olvidar*, the book was not published with therapeutic intent. Each woman narrated in first-person, identifying her relative by name, age, and describing the story of the family, the victim's work, union and political involvement. They detailed the circumstances of the arrests and the official response. They tell about searching for years and the nagging uncertainty about their fate up to the time of the testimony (1980). Not until 1987 was it possible to publish these narratives in the book *Memorias contra el olvido*<sup>15</sup>

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15 Rosario Rojas de Astudillo et al. *Memorias contra el olvido*. Santiago: Editorial Amerinda, 1987.

Unlike other groups of victims, from the start, family members of disappeared persons intended their testimonies as a mechanism for denunciation. This motivation led them to repeat their story countless times before lawyers and judges, in meetings with solidarity organizations, interviews with the press and other venues. The need to repeat the narrative as denunciation generated certain emotional dissociation that was important for that objective. The disappearance had given rise to a never-ending search that would not close until the final whereabouts of the disappeared person was discovered. The incessant nature of the repressive situation and the continuous denunciations limited or countered the therapeutic function the testimony might have in other cases. For that reason, in such circumstances, every testimony was necessarily an unfinished narrative incapable, on its own, of producing major changes in the individual's emotional condition.

### **Group testimonies in the context of protests 1983-1984**

Testimony was also used to denounce situations of collective repression that occurred from 1983 to 1984. On July 12, 1983, the day of the third national protest, 29 women from Esperanza Christian Base Community in northeast Santiago were arrested while preparing lunch for families who enjoyed a daily meal thanks to the neighborhood soup kitchen («olla común») these women ran. The cooks were preparing the food while the kitchen director was with a group of women who had come to pick up the meal to take back to their families. Suddenly, a patrol violently entered the premises and arrested everyone without an arrest warrant.

The soup kitchen had been created as a collective neighborhood endeavor to obtain food and cook for 300 families, assuring them lunch every day, except Sundays. While the 29 women were in custody, the families could not feed themselves. The arrest shook up the community, fearful for what would happen to the women. Some of the women were released after spending a day in police custody. Others were taken to a secret detention center operated by agents of the repressive National Information Central (CNI), with no word about their whereabouts during several days. Nearly all were abused, denigrated and some were tortured. They sought help from human rights agencies after release. The group therapy work began in that context.

Several women who had been arrested, along with their husbands and some children participated in the group sessions. The testimony of the arrested women (as well as their husbands' testimonies) was reconstructed in the course of the group therapy. The sessions were tape-recorded, transcribed and they developed the content together. The first objective was to compose a joint narrative of the experience of the arrests that had occurred three weeks before the sessions. The testimonial document was

always viewed as a tool for denouncing what happened both within the immediate community and the population at large. The names of the people and even of the community were changed to protect them from reprisal.

The testimony is quite extensive and was developed as a collective history of the group arrest. Each participant introduced herself and described her experience. Different people, including children, gave voice to their perceptions of the experience. We have chosen to focus on the narrative of the kitchen leader, Maria del Carmen, who was held in custody the longest. Her testimony dates from August 1983.

*My name is Maria del Carmen. I am 45. I have five children. My husband is unemployed and works in the Minimum Employment program (PEM). That is not real work; it is an exploitation of hunger. They took me to CNI; it was nighttime when they took me out [from custody in the police station], blindfolded and handcuffed, and put me into a van, head first, with my feet almost off the ground, rolled, and with my whole body on top of my arms, handcuffed. And then they threw a blanket on top of me and at that moment I thought I was going to suffocate.*

*I asked them why they took me away in those conditions. »I feel like I've been sentenced to die but I have not done a thing,« I said, »Is there a law that punishes me for asking for a plate of food for my children? Two of them are already malnourished.«*

*Then they told me, »Lately, we put laws up the ass.« That made me think that I would not come out of there alive, because of the way they treated me and the way they kept me there. They subjected men to harsh torture.*

*When we got to the CNI, a woman helped me undress, and I could hear men's voices. They took my clothes off and mocked me, calling me obese, and said, »And they say they're hungry.« Constantly during the interrogations they pointed out how fat I was, and they came to know my body well.*

*[...] Know what I think? What happened to me is terrible, because the CNI decides whether or not you are guilty. They are like the courts, because they didn't take me any other place. They made me sign a bunch of papers that I couldn't read even though the blindfold was lifted slightly so I could sign.*

*[...] They told me that my son was outside and I heard a child wailing. It was not my son, who is retarded. I can recognize the cry of each one of my children. They told me they had him outside and when I heard that cry, I calmed down because I knew it was not my child. Even so, a big shout came out of me and I exclaimed, »No! Not my children!«*

*I felt like my body was not my body anymore, as if my body did not belong to me. I had the feeling at that moment as if my head were de-*

tached from the rest of my body. They stopped interrogating me, and then started up again, more violently, threatening me. A guy came in who hit me hard on the shoulder. It was annoying; it did not hurt exactly, but it was maddening that they could do that to you.

They constantly accused me of being involved in politics and they pressured me hard to name some political person. [...] During the whole time at the CNI they interrogated me hard; the pressure was very great, and the accusation was serious. They accused me of being a political person. Then with all my might I asked God to give me strength to be able to withstand, not to break down and betray myself of something I had never done. They accused me of being an activist in a cell called Alicia Ramirez. They said I had signed up as a Communist in that cell in 1974. I told them: »I want to see it. You say you have grounds to say that, so I want to see my signature [...] And, I'm not as illiterate as you think.«

[...] I would lose hope. There were moments I would break down so much that I thought I was dying. I would say it just couldn't be that I was in those conditions just because I had been waiting for food for my children. They would keep quiet and I got the impression that they talked about it among themselves. I was stretched out with my shoulders on the bed and I begged them to take me out of there. I was sweating all over. The sweat suit was all wet. They didn't take it off me either. In all my life I have never perspired as I did then; even my hands were wet. When they let me out of the interrogation, they threatened me, and they were torturing other people, many people before they got to me.

[...] I was at the CNI Friday night through Monday when they abandoned me on a street in the Municipality of Quinta Normal, on the way to my house but still far away. Two guys and a woman took me blindfolded out of the van. They held on to me so I wouldn't fall. It was about 8:20 in the morning and there was a thick fog. They took the blindfold off and said, »Lady, if you move from here before three minutes are up or if it should cross your mind to look at me to find out who I am, consider yourself dead.« I remained there, trembling in fear because he told me not to look around. I have no idea how many minutes passed and I was waiting for someone to say, »You can walk now,« »You can go.« No one said a word until a gentleman passed by and asked me, »Is something wrong, ma'am?« I didn't dare answer him. Then he came closer, took my hands because I was shaking, with a bag hanging and my hands like this, and my eyes closed. Then I asked him, »Is there a car in street?« He must have taken a look and then he said, »No, I don't see anything.« [...] He asked me again, »Is something the matter? Where are you going?« I told him, »They just took me out of a CNI van and threatened to shoot me if I looked around.« And he

*helped me, but I could not walk. It was as if the tension had stuck me, impaled me there and I was very, very frightened.*<sup>16</sup>

The reconstruction of the experience of the women of the Esperanza Christian Base Community kitchen aimed at identifying facts, recognizing fears, and recovering the capacity to assess the reality that affected them. Fear had given way to panic. Some of the women were afraid to gather in the building where they prepared the food, fearing another arrested at any moment. Others thought the kitchen had to be suspended to avoid repression. But everyone lacked the minimum economic resources to feed their families and if they closed the kitchen (»la olla«, »the pot«), their families' situation would become intolerable.

Incriminations among the women increased each day. Rumors spread about reprisals if their organization persisted and they accused each other. Maria del Carmen's reaction, as one can gather from the testimony, exemplifies the difficulty some women had in recovering the normal flow of life after the repressive experience. She began denouncing the incident in court, on progressive radio stations and other media, and human rights organization.

She became emotionally upset. She viewed herself in an improbable role: her arrest and fear had converted her into an »important« person. It is certainly true that for a few days she was the center of attention in her neighborhood, her family, the kitchen, and even public opinion. It was she who turned to the human rights organizations and sought psychological care for her and her friends. But public attention on her case was necessarily transitory. Arrests numbered in the hundreds and many people had died the day of the protest. Her incapacity to process what had happened had led her to adopt that position as denouncer and to repeat what had happened to her to anyone who would stop to listen.

Maria's reaction annoyed her family and the group that operated the kitchen. Previous conflicts with her spouse and friends were exacerbated. Maria's fear had been appeased by her continuous denunciations, without working through or understanding her fear or what had happened to her. Creating the testimony as a group effort successfully contained her anxiety that had been out of control. It also gave her the possibility of working through, if only partially, conflicts around her that her anxiety had triggered (We had to continue working with her on an individual basis.).

For Maria and the other women who were arrested, the experience had been one of chaos and anguish, emotionally uncontainable unless they had a structure to lean on to help understanding what had happened. The narrative structure served that purpose. It helped settle themselves, express their

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16 »Una triste lección para Chile: Comunidad Esperanza. Protesta 12 de julio 1983«. 1983, manuscrito.

fears and to distinguish, at least partially, sources of threat. Each woman told her own personal experience in a chronological progression. Then the re-reading the transcribed tape recording provided a moment for reflection when, on the basis of the individual narratives they drafted a single text. Reviewing the chronicle of events allowed recovery of the experience beyond the personal sphere. As the women indicated, their text documented what had happened as a »lesson for Chile.« Their arrest and fear had been the price of fighting for their right to life and nourishment for their children but also for the change they hoped to see in the future.

### **Methodological and ethical aspects of testimony in therapy**

Testimony as a therapeutic tool represented a way to integrate aspects of the traumatic effects of political repression. Victims of torture, in particular, communicated what they had endured in a fragmented fashion – part facts and part emotions. But only what was experienced, when recovered in its totality, could have meaning for the person, in other words, allowed them to learn and understand »why this happened to me.« Paradoxically, the testimony was also a kind of total confession, like the one the torturer had demanded and the individual had refrained from giving at the price of great pain. As noted, when the political circumstances changed, testimony increasingly lost its usefulness since the therapeutic effectiveness of testimony evaporated.

We wish to underscore the need – both methodological and ethical – for the researcher to differentiate between a testimony created as part of a therapeutic process and an interview used in the context of social science research. Social science researchers tend to find stories like Maria del Carmen's »interesting.« She exemplifies what happened in Chile to people like her who were community leaders. In the critical moments of subsequent years, many survived their anxieties, losses, and pain in midst of family conflict, economic deterioration, repeated persecution, and other adversities. Generally such people willingly tell about their lives and repressive experiences when someone asks. We have seen how Maria del Carmen's self-esteem elevated when she talked about her detention to the press and in court, and how for a time that gave certain relief to her emotional situation. Such is also the case with many other leaders. They feel great emotional well-being when others find them »interesting« and take the time to listen to them. In most cases that sense of well-being is momentary, but it gives researchers the impression that talking about a person's past and life is beneficial for the person they have interviewed, or at least harmless. If for some an interview may have a therapeutic effect, for others it can be devastating. Reactivating anguish and vulnerability associated with the memory

of personal loss or painful years of their life may be not only painful but also tremendously de-stabilizing.

The testimony of a victim of political repression may be understood as a map of pain. Upon retracing those routes, wounds reopen, and require closure by the protagonist or witness, although, that pain may appear to be nearly invisible or mitigated. They need closure to contain the traumatic events in the process of remembering, highlighting the resources and strengths that have sustained the person. An interview conducted in the context of social science research must take into consideration these elements in order to protect the respondent's psychological integrity.

Experience shows that an attentive and warm researcher can conduct a profound interview without injuring the respondent, as long as that researcher has the capacity to recognize the emotions and feelings of the other as well as one's own limitations. In other words, that interviewer must know when to stop in order to avoid exposing the respondent to greater pain. The researcher must first keep in mind the meaning of the interview and how it fits into the research, as occurs in a therapeutic process, by defining the rules of the relationship and the aspects of the person's life that will remain off-limits.

Another distinction to consider is the issue of the »truth.« During the period of extreme denial and silence that characterized the dictatorship, it was very important to be able to »tell« in therapy what happened to the person. In psychological terms, this implied confirmation of the experience and validation of the patient's perceptions, in order to discredit the denial in which government powers had forced the person and still was publicly. For this reason psychotherapy considered especially significant that the person find his or her »own voice« to articulate »his truth.«

The victim's experience, restored as truth in a written testimony, constituted a component of the overall denunciation of human rights violations committed by the dictatorship. This enabled the denouncer himself to recognize that his experience enmeshed alongside others who had experienced a similar situation. Comparing one's own history with other episodes, the person might reach the conclusion that his individual persecution was a fragment of »a generalized massacre,« in the words of a farm worker leader on reflecting about his prison experience.

Now, the narrative of that repressed individual, which comprises the reconstructed truth that confirms his experience – one that will coincide with many others – is not the »history of repression.« On the therapeutic dimension, the intent was to imbue the experience with meaning, within the circuit of the person's own life, situating what happened not as »that madness that affected us« – a manner of referring to those years that dissipates all sense of responsibility – but in the context of a national political conflict in which they participated.

To summarize, the testimony given in the therapeutic sphere resembles, in many ways, the life stories and other personal narratives of what is known as oral history as well as clinical histories and judicial testimony. However, it has significant methodological differences related to its specific purpose: to alleviate the suffering that afflicts the person who seeks assistance, and enable that person to retake the course of his or life as protagonist, not hemmed in by the condition of victim.

## **Conclusions**

Clinical practice during Chile's military dictatorship was a setting that led to a new understanding of trauma, particularly how it affects memory. Life-threatening experiences that individuals perceived as such (that is, awareness of the threat of death) were observed to alter the function of memory. In some cases, they generated massive oblivion of the experience. The repressive experience and the procedure of forgetting it were inaccessible to conscience. Or, to the contrary, memory became more acute, rendering the experience literally unforgettable down to every detail and meaning. The memory imposed itself and invaded the individual's life, flooding it with recurrent images and unbearable anguish that were unrelenting whether awake or asleep.

Clinical practice also has shown that especially when treating traumatized persons, catharsis can bring relief and can even cause some symptoms to subside, although nearly always transitory, because the psyche had restructured on the basis of that perceived life-threatening element. Dissociation was the most common defense mechanism for dealing with the anxiety. The facts could be narrated point by point as if the narrator were only a bystander or unemotional witness. Returning to the moment of menace and remembering what happened did not suffice. Reconstructing the route that led to »forgetting« the episode was a therapeutic path that implied working with what the individual had experienced after the traumatic event, remembering how the threat was perceived as »death« and had become implanted in the individual's personal history, affecting bonds, work and dreams.

The testimony interposed the individual experience within the context of a process of the history in which it occurred. It enabled understanding how the collective process linked with the lives of concrete individuals who comprised that global process. This interconnection facilitated comprehension of »what happened to me« as something that happened to many others, and that understanding about »what happened to us« then led to »why this happened to us.« Thus, analysis about the individual experience could transit to a dialectic review of the catastrophe as not only individual but also affecting family and the nation, recognizing a broader

assessment of the reality of what happened. In this regard, it was important for the patient to be able to perceive the explanatory limitations of versions that either stress solely individual blame or attempt to exclude all personal responsibility, attributing the burden of the events entirely to a political conspiracy.

Lastly, it is important to bear in mind that not all patients experienced a sense of relief upon telling their story. Many told their stories in a disassociated fashion, maintaining structural defenses through the trauma. Not necessarily the mere fact of reconstructing the story would have an effect that the victim perceived as positive. Many patients explicitly stated that they wanted to forget and did not want to talk about what had happened to them anymore, especially denigrating and terrible experiences.

Furthermore, our experience with therapy showed us the persistence of the notion that it is possible and advisable to forget. Nevertheless, our ability to forget commonly originates from the process of remembering and working through the past until achieving a state of peace with your own truth and the true facts.

Greek tragedy interpreted as a consequence of »fate« those aspects of life that a human being experiences which cannot be controlled in any way. At the same time, it stressed that human nature in fact represented a struggle to live according to one's capacity; in other words, not resigning oneself to fate<sup>17</sup>. It conveyed to the audience the horror of violence, death, devastating injury, and irreparable abuse of power especially when exercised between relatives and other people close to one. It sought to expose the dilemmas of forgiveness, vengeance, hatred, as well as generosity, loyalty and love. The public emotionally identified with the drama. Expressions of pity, compassion, horror and sadness evoked by characters and events dramatized were all the greater when these resonated in their personal lives beyond mere political references. By inviting the public to feel and think about an event that had affected a community, the tragedy functioned, however, as a powerful tableau of fundamental dilemmas de of human coexistence, whose relevance transcends centuries.

During the years of dictatorship »remembering« and »keeping memory alive« was an issue for victims. »Do not forget« was their permanent response, forged from the visceral loyalties to their loved ones, their aspirations, their hopes, to the regime's call to forget, expressed in its discourse each day. At times, the exercise of telling what happened and searching for the truth had the effect of a ritual that eased the pain, precisely because »my narrative will be preserved like history external to me, independent of my recollection« and only then »maybe I could forget« or at least, »I would not need to pledge to constantly remember.«

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17 Aristóteles. *Poética*. Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1991.

The victims we assisted fought so that the entire Chilean society would embrace the commitment to memory beyond the family members themselves. Perhaps the dramatization of Greek tragedy fulfilled a need to delegate responsibility not to forget through a multi-voiced testimonial that appealed to contemporary citizens. Perhaps, in dramatizing true or genuine historic events that touched and destroyed the lives of protagonists in political and personal conflicts, Greek tragedy freed them of having to sustain memory as an individual task.