

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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## Life under Pinochet: “We still don’t know what happened to my brother”

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/life-under-pinochet-chile-remembers-we-still-don-t-know-what-happened-my-brother-2013-08-05>

*Hardly a day goes by when Gloria Elgueta doesn't think about how her brother Martin may have spent his final days. He was detained by Pinochet's political police and held in Londres 38, a colonial building five blocks away from their family home. After years searching for justice, Gloria joined other relatives in a campaign to turn the notorious house of torture into a memorial site to remember those who lost their lives.*

There's one memory Chilean activist Gloria Elgueta will never forget of the darkest days of the Pinochet regime. Everyday for a fortnight she would walk five blocks from her family home in the centre of Santiago and stand and stare at an old colonial house known as Londres 38. The elegant façade belied the horrors taking place inside. This was one of Pinochet's detention centres of choice: a place of torture and death. She suspected her brother, Martin, a student, was inside and there was nothing she could do.

In July 1974, members of the DINA (Pinochet's political police) came knocking on their door and, simply, took him. They never gave an explanation for the arrest or brought any charges against him.

Almost immediately after Martin's arrest, Gloria and her mother joined hundreds of others whose loved ones had been taken to unknown locations. It was a desperate pilgrimage to public offices, tribunals, and independent organizations, looking for help and information regarding the fate of their relatives.

“We knew we had to ask – we needed to know. We went to the health services and the morgue, thinking that we would find him dead. It was a pretty much pointless pilgrimage because we didn't get any response regarding where he was. Everybody in authority would constantly say that my brother had not been detained,” she said.

The first clue that Martin was being held in Londres 38 came from one of the few activists who survived imprisonment and been released.

“We know he was held there for around 15 days. We spoke to one of the other detainees and they had seen him inside. We think that he was there until early August. After that we didn't have any other testimonies from people who were held with him. What we were able to establish is that during that period, detainees were transferred in groups, killed and their bodies, hidden.”

For many not knowing where their loved ones were or what was happening was a heavy burden to bear.

“I know relatives who went to Londres 38 and knocked on the door - but it achieved nothing – they were threatened. One woman even went with a priest to try and find out if her grandson was held there but they too were turned away. Knowing your loved ones may be inside and not being able to cross that door - it's just unthinkable.”

Nobody knows exactly how many people were held at any one time in Londres 38. However, human rights organizations estimate that as many as 2,000 could have been detained during the time it functioned. At the time Chile was largely a country in denial.

“People around Londres and all other detention centres knew that things were happening there but people were afraid to talk,” Gloria said to Amnesty International. “There was a very clear fear amongst most people. My mother, , would talk openly about my brother and what was happening and people would pretend they were not listening.”

While the whereabouts of most of those detained are still unknown. Some did survive. Martin’s arrest was the second time her family had been targeted.

Two months before Martin was arrested, Gloria’s older brother, Raimundo, was also taken by the military and held because he had allegedly broken the country’s strict curfew. He was eventually released in November 1976 having survived torture and ill treatment. But for Gloria - not a day goes by when she doesn’t think about the fate of her brother Martin.

“I think the worse thing is the still not knowing. Even after 39 years we still do not know what happened to my brother. You think about the violence he may have suffered, his death, not knowing, not having all the information is something very complex for me. But the most difficult thing is the lack of justice in Chile.”

Gloria believes that even though some positive steps were taken in the past few years to ensure those responsible for the thousands of killings, disappearances and torture during Pinochet’s regime face justice, impunity is still the norm.

Her and her family still ignore what happened to Martin and where his remains are. No one faced justice for the crimes he suffered.

“I think the result of the search for real justice is failing. What we know is very general; we don't know the truth about each individual case. We know that they are missing and that they were killed but the full information required by the courts to establish who was responsible is lacking. There’s a veil of secrecy around all of that, facilitated by a lot of complicity. Even now we know there are archives of information about those cases.”

Since Pinochet was ousted in 1990, the notorious colonial building of Londres 38 has been turned into a fitting memorial for those who were tortured and lost their lives.

“It’s important to me and the other relatives of those detained in Londres 38 that they are not forgotten. By making this into a memorial it’s a way to turn the dreadful repression, persecution and horror of what happened into something positive. It’s a chance to turn our experiences into something we can share with others.”