

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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Life under Pinochet: 'The day we buried our freedom'
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Chilean author Isabel Allende remembers the military coup on 11 September 1973, and how it changed her own life and her country forever.

How did you get the first signs that Augusto Pinochet was staging a military coup against Salvador Allende?

People were talking about the possibility for some time, but it was a vague rumour that nobody quite believed. Salvador Allende, however, was convinced that there was a real threat and that the American CIA was behind it. Chile had such a long and solid democratic tradition, that the idea of military intervention was almost unthinkable, so Allende's fears seemed exaggerated. Certainly nobody thought that Augusto Pinochet would become a traitor. The first news that Pinochet was involved in the coup came on 11 September.

Pablo Neruda was a symbol of the opposition, and his funeral marked the first protest against the military coup. How do you remember that day?

Pablo Neruda's death [on 23 September 1973], which deserved a national day of mourning, was ignored by the dictatorship. His house in Isla Negra had been searched by the military and his house in Santiago was broken into by the security forces during his wake. The word of his funeral got around and people gathered to accompany his remains to the cemetery.

We knew that it was dangerous. The military government tried to make sure that there would be no political demonstrations during the ceremony. But short of shooting everybody it was impossible to stop people from reciting Neruda's most revolutionary poems or chanting slogans and protest songs, like the music by Victor Jara, who had been tortured and killed in the National Stadium a few days before.

We walked several blocks to the tomb where Neruda's coffin would be temporarily placed. His wish was to be buried in his house in Isla Negra, looking at the Pacific Ocean, the place he loved the most in this world. At the beginning there were a few of us and we were afraid of the soldiers, but as we walked, more and more people joined in and we started feeling stronger. The mood of the crowd shifted. Somebody began singing, another shouted Neruda's name, then Allende and Jara... It became very emotional and also scary. The soldiers were anxious, nervous; they didn't know what to do. I could see their fingers on the triggers, their jaws tense. It was a lovely spring day and as we approached the cemetery people poured in from the adjacent streets, crying, singing, hugging each other.

That day we buried not only the poet, we buried Allende, Jara, and hundreds of other victims, we buried our democracy, and we buried freedom.

What was the atmosphere like in Santiago after the coup?

Those who supported the dictatorship celebrated the death of Allende with champagne. They justified everything, including torture. It would take several years for them to realize the extent of the brutality and question the dictatorship, but some supported Pinochet to his very last day.

In 1973 and 1974 the atmosphere among the people I knew – students, journalists, intellectuals, artists, workers, etc. – was very sombre. We were scared, almost paralyzed by fear. Most people didn't want to get in trouble, just go on with their lives in a quiet way, keeping a low profile. There was almost no information, only rumours. We heard about torture centres, concentration camps, assassinations, raids in poor neighbourhoods, how thousands

were arrested and many more had fled the country, but there was no way of confirming these rumours. We feared that the phones were tapped and that many people had become informants, so we were cautious when we spoke, even within the extended family. Some of us got involved in helping fugitives, it was impossible to refuse help to those who needed a place to hide. At the beginning we were not aware of how serious the consequences could be.

For a tourist at that time in Chile, this terror was not apparent. The tourist would find himself in a clean city, with almost no urban crime; he would meet polite and meek people; and he would conclude that Chile was a very organized country. Even the children marched to school quietly in their uniforms! The tourist would see police everywhere and soldiers in combat gear and would be a little bored, because of the curfew, but otherwise he would enjoy the country. I could not live in such a place. I didn't want to live in fear and I didn't want my children to grow up in a dictatorship.

Were you harassed because of your family ties?

I was a journalist and my name made me rather visible. I was a feminist, a leftist and a relative of Salvador Allende, three reasons for the military dictatorship to keep me under surveillance. I was fired from all my jobs but I didn't think I was in danger until the beginning of 1975. But I was very unhappy in Chile, and my husband and I made plans to leave. It was very hard because we had no money, no connections and nowhere to go. We waited, hoping that soon the military would go back to their barracks and we would have democracy again.

Did a specific experience convince you to flee?

Several things happened in a single week that made me panic. I discovered that a new friend was really an undercover agent of the feared secret police. A relative who worked for the government let us know that I was on a blacklist and could be taken at any moment. A person whom I had hidden in our house was arrested and I knew that if he talked, I was doomed. I needed to get out. My husband and I made the decision together: I would leave immediately.

I had a valid passport. I left the country openly, alone. It was not unusual: thousands were leaving at that time. I went to Venezuela and a month later, when it became obvious that it would be risky for me to return to Chile, my husband left with our two children. We all reunited in Caracas, where we lived for 13 years.

More than 3,000 people were killed in Chile and many more simply disappeared. Were people aware of the horror at the time?

I'm sure that most people were aware. I certainly was, and so were all my friends. However, many people managed to, or pretended to, ignore the violence and corruption of the dictatorship.

I was in Chile in 2003, during the 30th anniversary of the military coup. By then all the information about the massacres, the torture, the hidden mass graves, etc, had been published extensively, there were many public ceremonies to honour the victims. And still some people denied the facts.

It is very hard to live in fear. Out of necessity, one adapts rapidly. Denial is a way of protecting oneself. There is a feeling of impotence and loneliness. Terror works by isolating people.

Ideally, every little family is at home watching the official version of the news on TV, there is no interaction, no public discourse, no dialogue or discussion, no exchange of ideas that might stir rebellion.

How did Pinochet hold on to power for 17 years?

Fear is a very powerful tool and Pinochet used it successfully. He controlled the military, the judiciary and there was no Congress; there was no freedom of the press, no habeas corpus, no right to dissent. He imposed an economic system that seemed successful at the beginning, although it benefited the capitalists while it maintained the labour force under an iron fist. The

gap between the very rich and the poor in Chile is still shameful.

As time went by, Pinochet's support dwindled and eventually the opposition was able to defeat him in the polls. But I always keep in mind that thousands of people cried for him at his funeral!

The criminal cases against Pinochet never concluded. What is – in your eyes – the explanation?

Pinochet was protected by the amnesty that he himself created, by his status as senator-for-life, by his connections and, especially, by the military. I believe that they didn't really want Pinochet to face trial; they delayed everything to give him time to die in peace, in his bed.

How close was your relation with Salvador Allende and how do you view his political work and ideas looking back?

Salvador Allende was my father's cousin. In Chile, that makes me his niece. My father left my mother when I was so young that I have no memories of him, but Salvador Allende remained close to my mother. Sometimes we had picnics or short trips to the beach, we visited for birthdays and holidays.

Salvador Allende had the dream of transforming Chile into a country where justice and equality would prevail. He wanted profound reforms, a peaceful and democratic revolution. He was way ahead of his time. In the 1970s the world was divided by the Cold War, and the United States was determined not to allow any Latin American country to follow the steps of Cuba. The CIA intervened from the very beginning to topple Allende's government. The political parties of the Chilean right were willing to destroy the country if that was the price they had to pay to get rid of Allende's Socialist dream.

Will the wounds ever heal in Chile?

Yes, all wounds heal in time. Forty years have gone by since the military coup and soon Pinochet will be just a name to frighten children in bed-time stories.