

# Prologue

## Chilean Voices

“We did not make the coup in order to establish a one-man dictatorship. We could not have imagined, fifteen years ago, what would eventually come about in Chile.” The retired air force general sat across the table in his apartment in eastern Santiago and looked at me somewhat suspiciously. During the first few years after he left the regime, he rarely if ever spoke of his experiences outside a closed circle of family and trusted friends, a precautionary habit shared by many Chileans. But of late he had been known to speak to the occasional journalist.

“As a rule I never speak to the foreign press,” he said. “Anything I have to say should be said in Chile and not to the outside world.” I explained that I was not as interested in his opinions on current issues as I was in his experiences, the events he had witnessed from within the regime, though I understood if he wanted to keep certain things to himself. He looked at me for a moment, and paused before speaking. “Ask me,” he said.

I came to Santiago in early 1980, with a trunk, a manual typewriter, and a small grant from the Inter American Press Association, which each year sends four or five young American and Canadian journalists to Latin America and an equal number of their Latin American counterparts to North America. I had already spent three years working in Guatemala, Venezuela, and Colombia, but no story, no country had ever fascinated me as much as Chile and its military regime. As a graduate student at the University of Missouri, I had written my

master's thesis on newsmagazine coverage of Chile during Salvador Allende's ill-fated socialist government, coverage that did not reveal the U.S. role in its destabilization. This factor, whose importance is still being debated, had not been revealed until after the bloody 1973 coup. I wanted to examine the extent to which the U.S. role had contributed to General Augusto Pinochet's permanence in power; I was unaware at the time that his own role in the coup was minimal and that his consolidation of power over the years was in many ways a strictly Chilean affair. And I hoped to witness the first stirrings of a democratic transition, a process far slower and more excruciating than most outside observers could ever imagine. Once set in place, the regime proved durable and resistant to outside influences, with diplomatic brickbats sometimes carrying all the weight of a paper airplane hurled against an armored tank.

Chile, extending for more than 3,000 miles along South America's western coast, is not on the way to anywhere, and it is a rare traveler who arrives either by accident or en route to some other destination. "Night, snow, and sand make up the form of my thin country, all silence lies in its long line," wrote Pablo Neruda, one of two Nobel Prize-winning poets Chile has given the world.<sup>1</sup> The territory begins in the north with the Atacama desert, then temperate valley continuing southward into a lake district that would resemble Switzerland were it not for the volcanoes incongruously dotting the landscape. The lakes expand as the traveler continues south, until the land mass finally disintegrates into an archipelago of hundreds of islands and islets, some sparsely populated, others barren, still others rising out of the South Pacific only at low tides.

"Maybe because we live between the Andes and the sea, our geography has isolated us. We have come to understand many things much later than the rest of the world," Hernol Flores, president of the country's civil service employees union, told me. "We Chileans were ignorant of what a dictatorship involved. We had lived for 163 years under a constitutional system, and democracy was like air to us, a central condition of being Chilean."

*En los tiempos de la república*, in the time of the republic, he recalled, Chileans swelled with pride when cadets from the military academy marched by. As schoolboys, Flores said, he and his classmates would pledge "a soldier's word" when asked to swear the truth.

The Chilean military, Latin America's most professional armed forces, were seen as honest, invincible defenders of the constitution, "a force for freedom and democracy."

For many Chileans, who had never lived under military rule and did not fully understand what military government would involve, the belated realization came brutally. Flores's predecessor as president of the public employees' union, Tucapel Jiménez, an early backer of the new regime, was found murdered in 1982, the victim of a right-wing death squad that had menaced him and his union for years. A few weeks after his death, Chilean police announced that an unemployed construction worker had hanged himself after writing a suicide note confessing to the murder. This assertion did not convince even regime supporters, but it was accompanied by a wave of officially inspired rumors to the effect that a dispute involving Jiménez's personal life rather than his union activities had motivated his killers. An official investigation into the killing eventually showed that the hapless construction worker had been murdered, but it failed, not surprisingly, to find the guilty parties in either killing.

Coming to Chile to work as a journalist held obvious risks, for the regime had a blacklist of foreign reporters banned from entering the country and I did not yet enjoy the backing of a large news organization. But after a few months' residence I was reporting for ABC radio, the *Financial Times*, the *Economist*, *Newsweek*, and other publications. What was supposed to have been a stay of roughly twelve months stretched to over nine years in a country I came to love.

Chile, even under a dictatorship, can cast a spell on visitors. I met many other foreigners who had come to the country for a visit or a temporary posting and had ended up as permanent residents. It was in Chile that I met my husband, who had initially come for a three-month job assignment, and where our children, Daniel and Alexandra, were adopted. What made Chile special was not only its physical beauty, but the Chileans themselves, who have an unusual mixture of Latin warmth and an almost English reserve and formality.

But friendship is not easy to come by in an atmosphere of political polarization and repression. Even the most superficial encounters were sometimes tense as each party in a two-way exchange attempted to guess the sympathies of the other, for reasons having as much to do with self-defense as with curiosity.

A woman I met at a reception shortly after I arrived in Santiago is a case in point. After exchanging the usual pleasantries she looked me in the eye and said carefully, "My husband was a cabinet official—with the former government." When she saw that my reaction was not hostile, we began a more animated conversation in lowered voices. Then there was the Chilean businessman with good contacts in the regime, who would speak off the record, always in English and with a radio playing in the background to thwart any hidden microphones the regime's security forces might have planted in his office. From such encounters it might be argued that the regime had unintentionally drawn attention to the importance of free discourse, but the practical effect of such intimidation was to discourage people from making new acquaintances and contacts.

If Chile's geography encourages insularity, years of dictatorship made its society even more inward-looking. Many if not all Chileans who supported the regime were openly hostile, even abusive, to foreign reporters, and to avoid such confrontations I eventually adopted the habit of not mentioning my work to strangers unless I was actively engaged in it. And like many Chileans I acquired the defensive habit of sizing up a person I had just met, looking carefully for any clues to their acceptance or opposition of the regime before deciding whether to reveal my profession. I told a Chilean doctor with a beard, darker coloring, and an irreverent manner; but talking to a smartly dressed middle-aged housewife residing in Santiago's *barrio alto*, the upper-income suburbs in the eastern part of the city, I limited myself to a statement of my husband's profession.

The Chilean capital's English-speaking community, which like many expatriate enclaves is small, gossipy, and cliquish, offered no relief. One evening I was at an embassy cocktail party, talking to a Chilean lawyer working with the Catholic Church's human rights department, when I turned briefly to say hello to a woman I knew distantly. When I saw her later, she awkwardly told me what her husband—whom I'd never met—had said to her after they passed me: "Why are you talking to her? She's a journalist and her husband is a communist." The Chilean lawyer with whom I was conversing was neither my husband nor a Communist Party member, I assured her, but then I realized that my work was at least as offensive to them as the supposed political affiliation of my imaginary spouse. Such incidents were not uncom-

mon, for many expatriates saw Chile through the prism of company contracts that included housing in an affluent area and membership in Santiago's Prince of Wales Country Club, where proregime sentiment ran high. And yet, whenever I found myself berating the society that the Pinochet regime had produced (or was it the other way around?) I had to remind myself that I was there voluntarily and that Chileans who found this atmosphere toxic usually had no alternative.

"Social life was destroyed," a Jesuit priest who worked in a poor neighborhood in central Santiago commented to me. "We Chileans used to be a very sociable people; we like to have fiestas, to invite the whole neighborhood." His parishioners, he said, now tended to lock themselves up in their modest homes after dark, visiting only relatives and a few trusted friends. The same social restrictions seem to operate in the upper-middle-class neighborhood where my husband and I rented a house. For the first few months after we moved in, our only contact with the other families living on our street consisted of a visit by a young woman from Opus Dei, a secretive ultra-traditionalist Catholic group, and an inquiry from the man next door who asked rather nicely if we needed any help. But by then I had taken on the bristle-like caution so sadly common under the dictatorship and did not follow up this all-too-rare gesture of neighborliness. When I learned that my neighbor had a son who was an army officer, I suspected I had taken the wiser course, and two years later we had yet to encounter our neighbor on the street, much less have the sort of conversation in which my status as a foreign journalist would have been revealed.

But then their housekeeper, whose habitual discretion had perhaps been shattered by grief, happened to tell us that our neighbors' two-year-old granddaughter had died after drowning in her parents' swimming pool. I wrote my neighbors a brief, formal note of condolence and attached it to a bouquet of flowers, but I hesitated even before undertaking this most ordinary gesture, fearing that it might elicit a hostile reaction if my neighbor and his wife had somehow learned I was a journalist. After seven years in Chile I had become, to my own disgust, as wary and mistrustful as any Chilean. As it turned out, however, my neighbors' initial reaction was surprise. A few days later the husband came to our house to thank us for the flowers. We spoke for a while, and he mentioned that he and his family had lived for a time

in Venezuela, an experience that he said had caused them to have an outlook somewhat different from that of many Chileans, “who might not have known how to respond to your flowers.”

In early 1980 when I arrived, Chile was in the midst of an economic boom of sorts that gave Santiago’s downtown area and its upper-income suburbs a feeling of unprecedented affluence. The Pinochet regime’s civilian economic team, dubbed the Chicago Boys because several members of the group had taken postgraduate degrees at the University of Chicago, had engineered what *Time* described as “An Odd Free Market Success,” boosted by high copper prices and record levels of foreign investment.<sup>2</sup> Yet the aura of prosperity did not translate into improved living conditions for poor Chileans or a more relaxed political environment.

At times, political repression manifested itself in bizarre ways. A civilian official at the state copper corporation, CODELCO, whom I had interviewed on the subject of molybdenum (a copper byproduct that had become Chile’s second largest export), attempted to get my press credential revoked. In the interview he had told me how CODELCO planned to begin direct sales of molybdenum to its clients abroad. But his comment irked the U.S. firm that still had a distribution contract with CODELCO, and the official reacted by calling the regime’s communications office, DINACOS, which accredits foreign journalists in Chile, claiming that I had failed to keep a supposed promise to let him read and approve the story before filing it. The CODELCO executive was not the only Chilean functionary who sought to censor his own statements, and over the years I encountered several civilian officials who ended our interviews with a request to review my story before it was filed, even when the subject was so seemingly neutral as economic projections. The authoritarian atmosphere was so pervasive and so arbitrary that Chilean officials were terrified of accidentally uttering something not strictly in line with what their own superiors would have them say. To be quoted at all in the foreign press was a risky undertaking for Chileans outside the government, even for those with proregime sympathies. This was the case for the then-president of Chile’s National Agricultural Society, who accepted

an invitation to have lunch with Santiago's foreign press club on an off-the-record basis, but who was so fearful of having his innocuous views made public that he said almost nothing about the situation of Chilean farmers.

Chileans opposed to the regime seemed alternately heartened by the outside world's interest and irritated by foreign reporters' requests for interviews, which might expose them to the risk of arrest, prosecution by a military court, or expulsion from the country. In 1981 I interviewed Jaime Castillo, a Christian Democrat who was president of the Chilean human rights commission. He spoke about the regime's new constitution, the different human rights policies of the Carter and Reagan administrations, and about Central America and his own Christian Democratic party.

"Don't forget that I live in a dictatorship," he said as I picked up my bag and was preparing to leave. He meant that I had to take every care in reproducing his statements, cautious as they were and punctuated with qualifying phrases such as "it is not for me to say." The interview appeared on the back page of *Newsweek's* international edition of March 30, 1981. Several weeks later Castillo and three other Chilean opposition figures were arrested in their homes, transported to the Argentine border, and expelled from the country. More than two years passed before he was allowed back into Chile, and in a subsequent conversation Castillo told me that the *Newsweek* interview had influenced the regime's decision to send him into exile. "But it was not your fault," he kindly hastened to add, when I must have blanched. Perhaps not, but a sense of guilt accompanied my more logical feeling of indignation.

If I had to let the Chileans I approached gauge the risks themselves, something at which they were far more adept than I was, the insinuation of responsibility nevertheless cropped up again and again. Ita Ford, one of four American churchwomen murdered in El Salvador in 1980, had worked for years in Chile before moving to Central America, and slum dwellers she had known in Santiago were preparing a memorial service on the anniversary of her death. When I telephoned a Maryknoll missionary to ask about the service, she somewhat nervously said she would call me back after talking to its organizers. When she did call back, she told me they had asked if there

was any way to read what I wrote before it was published. No, I said, there wasn't, and I ended up not visiting this particular poor neighborhood and feeling dissatisfied and frustrated by the entire episode.

The direct censorship imposed by the regime after the coup gave way to a form of self-censorship in which Chilean journalists attempted to ward off official sanctions by second-guessing the authorities' reaction and discreetly toning down or eliminating material deemed likely to incur official displeasure. Foreign journalists were not necessarily expected to play along with this game, but those Santiago-based correspondents whose dispatches offended the regime could expect to be called on the carpet at DINACOS, the government communications office, or issued an indirect expulsion threat through an intermediary, often a Chilean journalist sympathetic to the regime.

In 1981 I wrote a story for the *London Observer's* syndication service on the country's Roman Catholic bishops issuing excommunication orders against "he who tortures or is an accomplice to torture; he who orders it, solicits or incites torture; or he who is able to stop torture and fails to do so."<sup>3</sup> My copy of the story, filed in the morning through Reuters's network, had disappeared from my box at the news agency when I returned that afternoon. A Chilean reporter who at the time worked for Reuters and who staunchly supported Pinochet was standing near the mailboxes, along with the office secretary. Both looked uncomfortable when I commented that my file was missing; the reporter indicated that there had been some mix-up and to come back the following day. The next morning my box was still empty, and when I asked a young Reuters office assistant what had happened, he insisted that he personally had placed a copy of my file in my box after transmitting it the previous morning.

Since the story of the bishops' excommunication orders had been covered in Chile's progovernment press, it did not occur to me that Chilean officialdom might have taken issue with my report. I assumed the file had been innocently mislaid, and I thought no more about the incident until a few weeks later, when I learned that another pro-regime journalist had told several colleagues that I was about to be arrested and expelled from the country. When I confronted the journalist, who worked at United Press International as director of the agency's Chilean service, he said he had been at a cocktail party a few days earlier where "someone very close to the interior ministry" had



asked him if he knew me. The interior ministry official had then pulled a copy of the excommunication story from his pocket, showed it to him, and announced that “this girl has to go.” The Chilean journalist refused to tell me the name of the official and, somewhat embarrassed, said that the threat had really been a warning.

In other cases it was difficult to tell where official pressures ended and proregime sympathies began. *El Mercurio*, the country’s right-wing and most influential newspaper—and according to a U.S. Senate investigation, a recipient of Central Intelligence Agency funds during the Allende years—occasionally printed very brief human-rights-related stories, usually pegged to a court suit filed in behalf of a Chilean who had undergone *apremios ilegítimos*, illegitimate pressures at the hands of unidentified captors. The articles were usually written in such an oblique way that only the most discerning reader could understand the real story behind the *El Mercurio* item and grasp that “illegitimate pressures” really meant torture. At least two editors at other publications, neither a regime supporter, defended the use of the euphemism by telling me that *tortura* was too strong a word for general newspaper readers.

A bestselling book in Santiago during this period was *El Día Decisivo* (The crucial day), an extended question-and-answer session with Pinochet by an interviewer who for some unexplained reason chose to remain anonymous; in fact Pinochet himself is flatteringly listed as the author. The book, which was translated into English and other languages for distribution by Chilean embassies abroad, offers a revised account of the 1973 coup in which Pinochet greatly magnifies his own role. In the introduction the publisher writes:

In the past, whenever the country needed to overcome affliction, her children arose like heroes, leaders, or statesmen to help her successfully out of her predicament. Later, in the calm that follows the storm, when the historian’s pen describes those events for posterity, the life of each hero, leader, or statesman is found to be the culmination of a process of human and cultural formation, a disciplined, rigorous process, almost prescient of the call that the country was to make.

The life of President Pinochet, the protagonist of the events of September 11, 1973, is a case in point. As a young Army officer he very early realized the perils associated with international Marxism. He studied its doctrine and methods, and became conversant with the procedures of the Communist Party in Chilean politics.<sup>4</sup>

But retired Chilean military officers directly involved in the events up to and after September 11, 1973, tell a very different story, of a vacillating general who had become army commander barely three weeks earlier, who repeatedly warned his colleagues of the dire consequences in store for them if the coup plans were leaked. Dictatorships often attempt to rewrite history, and one oft-repeated claim by the Pinochet regime and its adherents was that Chile had never had a “real democracy,” but rather a long succession of governments nominally led by civilians representing narrow sectarian interests. In order to establish a solid base for a future democracy, according to this argument, the Chilean armed forces must remain in power while the necessary restructuring of the country’s entire legal and political framework was undertaken.

The regime’s attempts to rewrite history and alter events to fit its own ever-changing propaganda needs were evident on many levels. A clerk at the newspaper archives in the Biblioteca Nacional abruptly told me I could not read the September 1973 back issues of *El Mercurio* or *La Tercera*, a leading Chilean tabloid, because the copies were all “in very bad condition.” How this came to be was not explained. A request to look at the newspapers under the supervision of a library guard was rejected, but the clerk suggested I might want to see copies of *La Nación*, the official government newspaper, from that period. (I returned a few months later and asked for *La Nación*’s September 1973 issues, and was told curtly that this volume could no longer be lent, for it, too, was “in very bad condition.”)

The bound volume I received contained a gap dating from September 12, the day after the coup, to September 21, which might be explained in part by the upheaval in the newspaper’s personnel as Allende government staff members either fled or were fired and editorial content was adjusted to the new military regime. The issue for September 11, 1973, prepared the day before, had the unintentionally ironic headline, “The Armed Forces Depart,” referring to the resignation of three military officers who had served in the Allende cabinet.

*La Nación*’s next issue, September 21, 1973, bore a front-page photograph of overworked Chilean barbers cutting the locks of long-haired young men as a crowd of customers with similar hairstyles waited their turn. The accompanying story described a sudden, unex-

plained change in preferred hair length following the coup. After another four-issue gap in the bound library volume, the September 26 issue reports that the junta has ordered the arrest of thirteen Chilean leftists whose photographs appear on the front page. The next issue states that the junta has offered a cash reward for the capture of any fleeing Marxists.

Even Pinochet's own public statements were subject to cosmetic revision in the Chilean press. On August 16, 1984, I attended a rare press conference Pinochet gave for foreign journalists at the La Moneda presidential palace. A presidential aide informed us that the session was to be off the record and instructed us to leave our tape recorders outside the dining room. Pinochet entered the room, looking vigorous and in good spirits, and one of the reporters asked him if the meeting was in fact going to be off the record. He shrugged, smiled, and said that no, he had probably said most of what he would tell us that day on previous occasions. We looked around awkwardly, wanting to get up from the table and retrieve our tape recorders and yet not wanting to offend our host. A DINACOS official said that they were already recording the press conference and would make a copy available afterward. "Unfortunately some foreign news media have misinterpreted some of his declarations in the past," the functionary said. Pinochet fielded questions for slightly more than an hour, and appeared to enjoy the exchange, though most of the questions were not posed as assertively as they might have been under normal circumstances. He ended the session by shaking everyone's hand (and kissing me, inquiring where I was from).

We filed our stories from handwritten notes, and that afternoon I picked up a copy of the official transcript of the press conference. The document, bearing the seal of the presidential press secretary's office, was markedly different from what Pinochet had actually said. Not only was the text incomplete, but it included questions that had not been asked and remarks that Pinochet had not made. A correspondent from the Italian news agency ANSA had asked him if he would be willing to meet with youths from the Christian Democratic Party. Pinochet had answered, "No, because they are as putrid as the rest. I speak only with wholesome youth." The official text had been softened to read,

"No, because I only talk to non-politicized youth." Discussion of the controversy surrounding the construction of Pinochet's country home outside Santiago and relations with the United States and the Catholic Church were either eliminated or else markedly changed. When asked about his plans after leaving the presidency, Pinochet said, according to the official transcript, "Now, what happens with me, history will tell." His real response had been more apocalyptic: "Now, when I finish they can kill me as I expect. I'm a soldier and I'm ready."

An enterprising correspondent who had brought along a second tape recorder and used it after Pinochet indicated the session would be on the record was able to substantiate the foreign press club's subsequent protest to DINACOS, but an official there offered the following justification: when covering the president of Chile, "You should know what is on the record and off the record."

Most of what was reported about Pinochet and his activities came from a small group of progovernment Chilean reporters with access to La Moneda, yet the regime did not always trust even this carefully selected group. At the occasional press conference Pinochet held for the domestic media, censorship was the norm; in several cases the reporters were not even allowed to take notes, but were limited to asking questions. The Chilean government television station, Channel 7, the only one that reached the entire country, routinely broadcast camera footage of Pinochet's own speeches without the original sound; instead the announcer's voiceover paraphrased the general's words.

Memory, collective and individual, fades with time, a process often accelerated by trauma. In Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, an entire town suffers mass amnesia in the wake of a banana company's massacre of six hundred workers. In a dictatorship those who do remember must weigh the benefits of speaking the truth against the dangers of official reaction. Alejandro Ríos, a retired professor of geography and history at Chile's military academy, where Pinochet had been a cadet, told an interviewer that Pinochet had been a poor student. For this recollection the country's military courts prosecuted him on charges of insulting the president and the armed forces. More than two years after his words appeared in print,

the eighty-eight-year-old Rios was still forced to come before a military judge each month.

Locating information on Pinochet's life and career, as well as on the internal workings of the military regime, was a bit like trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces missing. Many former government officials with whom I spoke felt themselves to be in a more delicate position even than Chileans openly opposed to the regime. Often, the most obvious witnesses to events were the hardest to locate, such as ex-conscripts who had done their military service at the time of the coup. The old saying about there being all kinds of men in the army except rich men's sons is particularly true in Chile, and conversations with people who had supported the coup often lapsed into an uncomfortable silence when I asked if they knew anyone who had actually fought on September 11, 1973.

Few if any of the Chileans interviewed for this book were eager to talk, which lent more credibility to their accounts, since liars are often suspiciously forthcoming with their versions of events. To a journalist seeking accuracy, understatement is far preferable to exaggeration, and the flattened monotone of people describing the horrors they had witnessed lent chilling conviction to their accounts. A handful of retired military officers spoke, some on the record, some on background. A former Chilean police prefect, now employed as the security chief for the Sheraton Hotel in Santiago, also spoke, on the record. His boss had forbidden him to talk about anything remotely "political," but with a conspiratorial grin he said he saw no reason he could not talk to a foreign journalist about his extraordinary dealings with the regime's security forces. Former civilian officials of the regime were sometimes willing to talk, depending on their current relationship with the government and the direction of the prevailing political winds. And there was the testimony of a half dozen or so former security agents who, conscience-stricken, had left the regime's intelligence services and fled into exile outside Chile, where they told their stories to human rights groups. Although the jigsaw puzzle is still incomplete, their accounts, taken together, present much of the Pinochet regime's true face.

"If there are any doubts about what really went on under the regime, well, I had it straight from the horse's mouth," said Mariana

Callejas, a former agent for the regime's secret police organization, the DINA. "These army people, the captains, the majors, when they talked about assassinations it was as if they were talking about the last movie they saw." For other Chilean military officers, knowledge of such atrocities was painful and a matter of deep shame. "I am still trying to understand what happened to our institution, how officials I knew and respected came to commit the acts they did," said a retired army officer, who spoke on the condition that his name not be used. He had left the service before the coup and from his retirement had watched events unfold with a mixture of resignation and horror. There was the general, a onetime friend, who had ordered executions of political detainees already tried and serving prison sentences. There were the two young officers with promising careers he had once known who were recruited into the DINA. They came into public view a few years later, when U.S. authorities sought their extradition in connection with the 1976 car-bomb assassination in Washington of Chilean exile leader Orlando Letelier and his American coworker, Ronni Moffitt.

In telling his story, this retired army officer felt himself to be wading into more precarious straits even than Chileans who had been politically persecuted, for he had known many of the guilty parties personally and had good reason to fear reprisals. But as the Pinochet regime was drawing to an end, his concern for the truth overcame his fear.