

## The Courage and Strength of Inelia Hermosilla

- by Ramón Bannister

Our debut story focuses on the strength and courage of a single woman, Inelia Hermosilla from Santiago, Chile. This is the first in a series about Human Rights in Chile and the dictatorship of 1973-1990. I am often astonished at how women in particular can have such determination in the face of insurmountable uncertainty and political might. She might have been a frail, old woman, but this is the same woman who looked a dictator in the eye and threw herself at his feet in front of the whole world to demand that she gets justice - the justice that she never received. It was her wish that I tell her story. I hope that this story can offer a semblance of justice in an unjust world.

I met her in 2002 during academic research I was conducting, and saw her for the last time in the summer of 2006. Both times I had extended interviews, and both times I intended to publicize her story of loss, remembrance, sadness and hope. Both times I was shocked, horrified at mankind's brutality, and both times I cried. Inelia was an intense woman, full of joy and sadness, and a great cook. I was like a son to her; she reminded me of my grandmother who died in the mid-1990s. My wife and I enjoyed spending time with her, hearing her sing tango songs of love and Chilean waltzes of sorrow; we comforted her when she started crying one minute only to see her spring up in joy and a huge smile the next, laughing loudly. She was surely the most intense woman I have ever met.



Inelia Hermosilla, with photo of her son on top-left, one of many in her house.

### This is her story.

It was July 8, 2006, about 7:00 or 8:00 PM, when we began lighting candles and singing. My wife and I and many of Inelia's friends were showing our support for all the grief and pain Inelia had experienced in the decades before. We all cried and laughed together, singing songs of remembrance. We were commemorating, ironically, the beginning of a very tumultuous time for Inelia, a time that began when her son disappeared, vanished off the face of the earth. She was lucky. She had extra time with her son. Many others started disappearing the day of the coup, the September 11, 1973.

### The Crime: Kidnapping

It all started at about 9:40 PM, on July 8, 1974. Four men dressed in black walked up the three flights of stairs with one other young kid, probably in his late teens. Inelia noticed the teen wanted to say something, but he was being guarded and surrounded by the other men. He was looking for Tito, the nickname Inelia gave to her son. Inelia went to the dinner table where Tito had left a note for her. It said where he would be and when - at the university to take a math exam. She told them he was taking the exam, when, in walks her son Tito. He wound up skipping the exam. Perhaps he knew something would happen. Maybe someone tipped him off and recommended he

go home. Whatever the case, Inelia told him in front of the men that they were looking for him. Looking back she regrets making obvious he was the one they were seeking, being ignorant of what was going on at the time.

Tito wanted to give her the folder he was carrying, but one of the men didn't allow it. He took the folder away and told Inelia "I will return with him before 12am." Inelia knew something was wrong, so she followed them downstairs. At the 2nd floor, the man warned her not to follow them. But she continued following. As they were going down the stairs, the man repeated the warning, and said, "there'll be consequences." At this point she got angry, "What consequences? I'm his mother and want to know what you'll do with him!" Finally, they arrived to the first floor and threw Tito into a truck. She followed, in desperation, and began going into the truck with them. Then they beat her with a police night stick, knocking her down. They commenced kicking her while on the ground. "See, I told you old woman!" The man who had threatened her yelled at her, using all the curse words in the book, and finally they left her there. She was beaten so badly she couldn't move for a while. So she stayed outside, and slowly returned upstairs to her apartment, severely shaken not only because of her physical wounds, but due to the emotional pain of losing her son. She would unfortunately discover that the pain would never go away. She would never be able to have the benefit of closure. She would never know what happened to him.

## The Pinochet Dictatorship

It was [General Augusto Pinochet](#) who led the coup d'état on the 11 September 1973, along with three other military generals. The goal was made clear from the beginning – rid the country of the cancer Pinochet called communism. And do so forcibly, without mercy. Many suspected leftists were detained and taken to now infamous torture centers. Even Americans weren't immune to his wrath, as shown by the well-known case of two writers, [Charles Horman and Frank Teruggi](#). It is said that Charles Horman was killed because he knew too much about the U.S. involvement in the coup. In any case, almost all were tortured (using similar techniques as in [Abu Ghraib](#)), and many were murdered, their bodies dumped in the sea or buried in undisclosed gravesites to cover up the crimes. By 1990, about [3000 people](#) were executed; of them more than 1,000 were kidnapped and "disappeared." Perhaps Pinochet's biggest mistake was not realizing that the deep wounds he caused would come back to haunt him. One of those wounds was Inelia Hermosilla.

## The Search

She began searching for him on the same night he was kidnapped. Inelia and her daughter got a taxi and drove through all of Santiago until 5am. Eventually, she got help from a human rights commission. That led to her receiving a letter from the Pinochet government that her son was detained. In desperation, she took the letter to the Ministry of the Interior. Military soldiers read the letter and said "it was a mistake. The person who wrote it was new." She told them she knew they were lying. Then, suffering from extreme emotional anxiety, she passed out in front of them.

Through her search for Tito, she met and teamed up with other women who were seeking their kidnapped family members. They went to known detention centers and stood in long lines everyday for hours. One day, at a place called Cuatro Alamos, a soldier read from a list and called out for any family member of Hector Marcial Garaya Hermosilla, Inelia's son. She walked up excitedly with a bag of miscellaneous supplies, such as clothes, toothbrush, etc. The police sternly asked, "Who asked you to come up?" She said "the police officer over there at the door." They called him over and talked to him quietly. They then said they made a mistake. She looked at me, "He saw



Example of well-known detention and torture center, on 38 Londres St. in Santiago, Chile. Hence the name, House of Torture Londres 38, now a House of Memory.

the list! Tito was there at Cuatro Alamos!” She wound up passing out again. She fell on tree branches that punctured her leg and left her in pain for three years. They took her to the triage in Cuatro Alamos and asked her what happened. She responded, “What happens to mothers when they can’t find their children. And they keep lying to them.” The Doctor had someone give her a glass of water. She threw it at them, saying that it could be poisoned. Then, they threw her down on the floor and dragged her out of the facility. Her friends brought her back home. They were always there to support her, and she was there to support them.

“We’ve gone through all of those things,” she explains. Once she and the solidarity group of women, the Association of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared, went to Canada to publicize their stories. A man approached her and said he was Chilean. Eventually, he told her he was held in the detention center Cuatro Alamos in Chile along with her son. Tito often wondered about her. They didn’t give him food. He got an

ulcer. One day at 5am they took him away. Tito never returned to that detention center. With her voice getting patchy, sniffing, and at a low volume, she says to me, “They must have taken him out to kill him.”

### She Faces the Powerful

Inelia got a few chances to actually talk to Pinochet. One time, she spoke to him at the Ministry of Defense. She asked to speak with him, and he told her to go to another building. She asked him how they would let her in. “Tell them you spoke with me here,” he responded in his high-pitched voice. The next day that’s exactly what she did. The guards took her to the 8th floor of the Diego Portales building. She waited there all day and refused to leave until she talked to Pinochet. After they told her he could not see her, she told them that he should come and explain to her why he can’t talk to her. While explaining this to me, her speech got faster, more enunciated and louder. They demanded she leave, but she stubbornly stayed. Then police officers handed her a piece of paper that read, “It’s impossible to meet with you,” and a forged signature. She became angry: “You think I’m going to believe this? You guys wrote this! You should be glad I don’t have money so that I could sue you for doing this to me! What you guys are doing is very serious!” She turns to me and says, “Like that,” as if proud of herself for being strong. An officer escorted her outside of the building.

Another time - which is described in some detail by author [Lucía Sepúlveda](#) in [memoriando.com](#) and relayed to me by Inelia - she yelled at him so that everyone could hear what she said. He was part of a parade walking toward downtown Santiago on Christmas Eve. Inelia got wind of this and left work to wait for him on the street corner (Paseo Ahumada and Alameda). As she tells me the story, it’s as if she travels back in time, because she suddenly burst out loudly with the words she used on that day. She proudly demanded, “General, Give me a Christmas gift!! Tell me where you have my son!!!” And she continues, “The General looked at me.” She was of course arrested and taken to the Ministry of Defense, but she didn’t care. It was her son she was fighting for. When they questioned her, she said, “I am the mother of a detained-disappeared person, and you took him away from me.” Inelia showed much bravery and persistence in her days.

## Why Was Tito Targeted?

Tito was a very loving son. He sometimes accompanied her to work, and went to pick her up to take her back home. He sadly told her once he missed his father, who died in 1970. Tito was proud for being the student president in a student division of [MIR](#) in the university and wanted to tell his father. But being a part of MIR was his downfall. MIR was a revolutionary group considered to be on the extreme left, as they often declared their desire for arming themselves. Members of that group were amongst the first targeted for torture and execution, and amongst the first of leftist groups that was almost completely eradicated. Even if you were not a violent person and only subtly associated with the group, if you were with MIR you became a bull's eye.

But Tito was a young man at 18 years old. He wasn't a terrorist. He was like all of us when we feel like we're part of something important. Tito likely knew a lot of people and gained crucial information about how MIR was organized. Pinochet's regime needed the information he had, and I'm sure they did all they could to get it out of him. Then they tried to erase their crimes. However, Inelia was not the type to give up her search.

## Endurance Is Key

Inelia endured many injustices throughout her search. She and the other women were often laughed at, made fun of, accused of being crazy. At first, nobody believed that the government would kidnap people and make them disappear. And then the bodies started turning up, and people stopped laughing. As she cried, she explained to me that nowadays no one admits to being a police officer during the first few years of the dictatorship. No one takes responsibility for the awful crimes that were committed, because everyone realizes how inhumane everything was back then.

For a period of time Inelia hired an attorney to help her, in vain as she later discovered. One day, the attorney said that he may have found information about her son, but he needed money to take a plane to Arica. She got a friend to help get money, but the friend would only help on the condition that he meet the attorney before they bought the tickets. Inelia told me angrily, "Era CNI, po'!" ["He was a CNI agent."] [CNI](#) is the intelligence organization that was responsible for torturing people and making them disappear. It was known formerly as DINA. Inelia continues: "And he didn't do anything! He told me pure lies!" I asked her if she remembered his name. She said it was Rolando Concha, which I thought to be an alias.

Note: A Google search brings up someone with the same name who is listed as someone going through the legal system in current cases of human rights abuses. Look up: "Rolando Concha", chile, cni. Name comes up as Rolando Concha Rodríguez, and he seems to be connected to DINA and CNI. Perhaps it's not an alias.

Inelia wonders during our interview what else she can do to find her son. She asks me, "What else could I have done," as if admitting defeat. "I get insomnia thinking about it. If my husband were here, he would have searched for him. But he had the misfortune of dying before all this happened." Then, she describes a dream she recently had. Tito was extremely angry with her. He didn't even look at her. "Tito, are you leaving now?" Tito responded by rolling his eyes and making a "sssss" sound. She explains to me, "That was another period of great sadness that I had," as tears fall down her face.

Even though she knows he's in another place, she confidently states, "I consider him still alive. I talk to him. I cry with him." She doesn't sell the apartment because she's waiting for him to return. "He

could still come back, and if he does he could find other people here and not find me.” Right after he was kidnapped, she never locked the front door, and her daughter wasn’t allowed to use the phone because he could have called. Inelia would wait outside for him on the street corner near the house, imagining the military soldiers would bring him back. Soldiers warned her that she could be shot because there was a curfew. “I have suffered from all of those things, but what are you going to do?”

I asked her, as I have asked many who have suffered from having missing relatives, What do you need for closure? When will your search end? They respond unanimously. Until they know the whereabouts of the bodies, what happened to them, what was done to them, including all the torture they endured, and until those responsible are punished for what they did, they will not have closure and so their search will continue.

On August 21, 2006, we received an email which said that Inelia suffered a stroke about two weeks before the notice. A few days later we were informed that she passed away. It makes me sad that she died without knowing what happened. But she died as a proud, strong woman, and gained the reputation as a mother who never gave up. I dedicate this story to her and to all women who joined in the struggle for justice in Chile and much of Latin America.

The discussion will continue on [my blog](#), where I will ask questions more pertinent now than ever: What if the torturers apologize and admit their wrongdoing...Is that enough? What should Chile do with those who are still alive and were central to the human rights abuses, such as former generals and other high-ranking military officers? What about low-ranking soldiers who simply did what they were told to do, otherwise be killed themselves? Should Chileans “forgive and forget” and continue as a country with a vibrant future and strong economy? Is Chile able to continue as a democracy when the torturers still walk the streets?

### **Links:**

**General Augusto Pinochet:** <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinochet/>

**Charles Horman and Frank Teruggi:**

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB33/index.html>

**Abu Ghraib:** [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu\\_Ghraib\\_torture\\_and\\_prisoner\\_abuse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_torture_and_prisoner_abuse)

**3000 People:** <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1109861.stm>

**Lucía Sepúlveda:** [http://www.memoriando.com/noticias/801-900/847.html#\\_ftn1](http://www.memoriando.com/noticias/801-900/847.html#_ftn1)

**MIR:** [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary\\_Left\\_Movement\\_%28Chile%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary_Left_Movement_%28Chile%29)

**CNI:** [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manuel\\_Contreras](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manuel_Contreras)

**my blog:** <http://startbusinessman.blogspot.com/>