

Ana's Search For Her Disappeared Son: “I will continue as long as God Gives Me Life”

- By Ramón Bannister



Figure 1: Ana Rojas, wearing the photo of her son as she did during protests. Photo taken in 2006.

This is Part Two of the series on Human Rights In Chile, and it seems appropriate to detail the story of another woman whose son disappeared. Ana Rojas was an interesting woman. Less dramatic than Inelia Hermosilla, Ana's strength of character never waned. She too invited me to her house near the neighborhood known as La Plaza Brasil, in Santiago Centro, the central district of Santiago. She cooked a savory meal despite her advanced age, about the same generation as Inelia. I ate with her around 2:30 or 3:00 PM, the typical time for lunch in Chile. Chilean tortilla with spinach (from the Spanish influence – actually a frittata), homemade vegetable soup, cabbage salad with a lot of salt, and Chilean-style Italian bread (maraquetas), combined

with her story of loss and remembrance, memory and the search for her son. As with Inelia, I recorded her every word with the intent of publicizing her story.

This is her story.¹

The Search

There is little or no record of her son being kidnapped. But Ana knew he must have been detained when he didn't return home by nightfall. So, she went looking for him. Like most mothers whose stories I have heard, she went around the entire city of Santiago, asking people if they knew anything; and like most people searching for the disappeared, she never found him. Eventually, someone told her to go to the Pro Paz Committee, a human rights non-profit set up as a coalition of religious institutions to help families find their missing family members. Lawyers helped Ana bring her case to court to demand information about the whereabouts of her son. In court, they told her to come back the next day because they would have answers. But they lied to her like they lied to everyone else – they didn't have any answers.

I met Ana (and Inelia) as the result of doing research about the music she sang with a music group made up of women whose loved ones disappeared. I read books and watched films about them, and was simultaneously fascinated and perplexed by the courage that Ana and other women had, especially when they danced the cueca sola (cueca danced alone). The cueca sola comes from the traditional national dance, cueca. It is normally danced in pairs and is meant to be a flirtation between a man and a woman. They both encircle one another, winking at each other and encouraging the other to get close, all while holding a handkerchief in a stylized manner. The women who have disappeared family members turn the tradition on its head by using it as an open protest against the dictatorship. It is a protest because these women dance alone. Every time I watch the solemn dance, I realize the pain they have experienced. Their dance became the subject of a song by Sting, "They Dance Alone," who sang it in Chile² and invited the women on stage to dance with him. The video of Sting's concert in Chile was not available at press time, but the video of the concert in Argentina is available.³



Figure 2: Ana sings while Violeta Zúñiga dances the cueca sola. Inelia's house, 2002.

As I got to know them they were so infectious that they became my second family. But when they introduce themselves to strangers or when they perform in public they deflect attention to their missing family members. So, when I picked up my microphone to record their names, what they gave me instead is a stylized introduction. In Ana's case, it was the following:

"Soy madre de Alfredo Rojas Castañeda, detenido y desaparecido, desde el cuatro de marzo, de mil novecientos setenta y cinco . "

[I am the mother of Alfredo Rojas Castañeda, detained and disappeared, from the fourth of March, nineteen hundred and seventy-five.]

Suffice it to say that I had to go around to everyone again and ask them to state their own names. They are so dedicated, and it is that dedication that I wanted to bring out in Ana's story.

Why Was Alfredo Rojas Targeted?



Figure 3: Alfredo Rojas and President Salvador Allende (right) shaking hands.

Before he disappeared on March 4, 1975, he was in his thirties and supporting his mother, Ana. Ana was a single mom. She tells me that she worked hard to set a good example and give him a good education. He got that education, earning a Bachelor's degree in engineering from the University of Chile. He eventually got a good job; Salvador Allende, the democratically elected Socialist President, appointed Alfredo as General Director of the State Railroad (of Chile).



Figure 4: Alfredo Rojas (middle) in context on the job. Note how the workers watch him like he's the boss.

The problem was that anyone working as an official member of Allende's government was targeted by Pinochet's regime (see brief history on the dictatorship in Part One of this series). The case of Orlando Letelier is probably one of the most well-known cases, because he was targeted and assassinated in Washington D.C. No doubt Alfredo was a priority from day one. Indeed, a review⁴ (published by IPS NEWS) of a book tells us that he had been detained and tortured before his disappearance. When he did disappear, Ana resolved to never give up looking for him. She proclaimed, from that day on, "I've never stopped even one day searching for him and asking questions in different places." She never received answers. But that didn't prevent her from continuing her search.

Is An Apology Enough? The Case for Immunity

Ana's determination has come under fire over the last decade. Many in Chile think that it is time to move on and forget about all that happened in the past. Others don't want to forget the past, but they still think that steps should be taken to help transition to a peaceful democracy. Chile is a democracy right now, albeit one with much to resolve. Should we absolve the officers and soldiers during the dictatorship of any liability for their crimes against humanity? Some say yes – after all, that may be the only way to get the information Chilean mothers seek about the disappeared. How else can you expect a former torturer to admit what he did?

So, every time I go to Chile and drink tea with them I ask these women: Is an apology enough? What if, out of chance, someone comes out from the shadows and reveals his past as a torturer? Assume that he even names his victims, and tells all the families exactly what happened and who did what. He even points out the locations of the bodies, and then apologizes and even cries and begs for forgiveness. "Is that enough?" I recently asked Victoria Díaz (summer of 2009).

Victoria's father was Victor Díaz, second in command of the communist party who took over as director when the original director was kidnapped and murdered. Victor Díaz disappeared on May 12, 1976. Recently, information came to light that he was murdered by wrapping a plastic bag around his head and injecting cyanide into his body until he suffocated to death. For months before his death he was tortured, which Victoria proudly says is a sign that he wasn't talking. They wanted information that he didn't give, otherwise they would have killed him long before they did. Victoria told me that one day during his torture his captors put the phone to his ear to talk to Pinochet. So, Victor Díaz took the opportunity to declare, "You may beat and kill me. But you'll never kill the people's spirit."



Figure 5: Victoria plays guitar as director of the music group. She recently resigned. Inelia's House, 2002.

So, I asked her, "What if somebody confesses. Would you offer him immunity in return for knowing what they did to your father and where they dumped his body?" She answers with a resounding "NO." She explains that Chile won't be a true democracy until the torturers are punished for what they did. Ana Rojas and Inelia Herмосilla made similar statements. But how, I ask myself, do they expect to get the information they need so that they can finally have closure? The answer they give is easier said than done: through the courts, through the legal system, openly and publicly so that everyone knows what happened between 1973 and 1990. There are those who say Chileans should forget the past, or if not forget than gloss over it and build the government even stronger to avoid another dictatorship. But the families of the disappeared would counter by arguing that as long as the perpetrators of human rights abuses go unchecked, it can happen again.

As I mentioned before, the problem Pinochet produced could not go away. The mothers, daughters, wives, and other family members whose loved ones disappeared were so grief-stricken that they could not forget what happened. In the case of Ana, she didn't let it go. Her psychological pain consumed her, which forced her to seek resolution. The only path to resolution was finding out what happened and putting the perpetrators behind bars.

Fasting

Throughout Pinochet's reign, human rights groups often turned up the pressure by fasting. Ana participated in at least one, but it wasn't easy. It got so bad for her that the other participants helped her to go to the bathroom because she didn't have strength to walk or stand up. Thankfully, there were doctors present who helped day and night, monitoring people as their bodies weakened from the lack of nourishment. Ana was so bad that once she had to get injections. But her veins were not easily visible, so the doctors decided to administer the injections on the heel of her foot. On another occasion, people had to slap her face because she had fainted. She found out in the morning when she wanted to look at herself in the mirror and her friends objected. She looked anyway. "My face was red because they hit my face so much. It was so I would survive [the fasting]." The days were "very difficult and very terrible," recalls

Ana. Finally, the Pinochet government said it would give them answers if they ended the fast. The women agreed, but - surprise - they never received answers.

Chilean Arpilleras

The Catholic Church helped to sow the seeds of many forms of protest, but one in particular helped to raise international awareness: arpilleras. They were works of art – tapestries sewn on a base of burlap – that served multiple purposes. First, they were a conduit through which the women expressed their deep sorrow. I see any arpillera as a representation of the women's emotions that helped them through the grieving process. Second, arpilleras became a source of income, because they would give them to the church on a regular basis. The church would then give the women money, in effect “buying” their art. The church would then smuggle them out of the country and distribute them internationally to spread the word about what was happening in Chile.

The third purpose was to protest the dictatorship and human rights abuses. Much of the content depicted the family member's kidnapping. I was fortunate enough to obtain some arpilleras that Ana made. The photograph to the right is one of these tapestries. It was the act of sewing this artwork that allowed the women to come to terms with what happened, make income and show the rest of the world the harsh brutality of the dictatorship.

Making arpilleras was Ana's only source of funds because she had no job. Her son had told her he would take care of her. But when he disappeared, she was left with nothing. She explains that she tried to claim the money in his bank account. However, when the DINA secret police kidnapped him, Alfredo had his checkbook. His torturers made him write a check every day until the account zeroed out. She knows this because she saw the bank records. So she started making arpilleras. Every week she turned them in to the committee and they gave her money. She used the funds to pay bills and buy groceries. Ana explains that it was an extremely harsh living situation for her. At the time of our interview, she had retired and was receiving a government pension as the relative of someone who disappeared.



Figure 6: Arpillera, made by Ana, which depicts her son's kidnapping. Note the two dark figures representing his captors.

The small group of women we met did a lot together. They struggled together. Ana asserts, “We were the first women who went out to the streets [to protest] during the dictatorship. No one else dared, not the students or the workers. But that cost us. The police would hit us with their night sticks, and spray us with hot, dirty water.” The dirty water came from trucks with water canons – typical riot-control equipment still used today. The water was tainted with some kind of chemical that burned people's eyes. Today, people in Chile take preventative measures.

Rumor has it that lime juice sprayed directly into the eyes neutralizes the chemical in the water sprayed from the canons. So, if you see protests and mini-riots on Chilean television news, you'll actually see people carrying limes. That's what they did in the 1970s and 1980s too, except it was much more dangerous, because the dictatorship didn't care about human rights.

Ana was a proud woman until her death shortly before Inelia Hermosilla died. She never did learn what happened to her son. All she knew is that he disappeared and was tortured in at least one specific torture center. The military later claimed, during the Table of Dialogue, that his body was dumped in the ocean along with several other victims. However, many of the military's claims have since been proven as lies. Ana is still with me in spirit. I'll never forget her. As she told us, "So, I'm here, continuing the struggle, struggling for him. I will continue as long as God gives me life. Because a son is the most sacred God has given. Therefore, as a mother, one has to continue, until one knows [what happened]."

¹ This story is based on an interview conducted in Ana Rojas's home, on the 23 of May 2002, in Santiago, Chile.

² Article about Sting's concert in Chile, written by Pablo Bachelet. (Publication date unknown.) "Chile's national stadium rocks to sound of Amnesty..." Last accessed on September 21, 2009, from <http://www.sting.com/archives/tours/tours.php?tourid=15&eventid=1286&viewall=1>

³ Video of Sting's concert in Argentina, last accessed on September 21, 2009, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1jslyzgXOK>

⁴ Estrada, Daniela. 2009 (August 20). "Rights-Chile: Personal Stories Bring the 'Disappeared'to Life." Last accessed on September 21, 2009, from <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=48158>