

TESTIMONIO

Santiago de Chile, antes de 1970

Terminé mis estudios secundarios en el Instituto de Humanidades Luis Campino en 1969, en ese entonces empezaba a descubrir ideas políticas que ya se estaban gritando en las calles de Santiago por los sectores más desposeídos de nuestra sociedad. Ideas políticas que empezaban a ser discutidas en mi grupo familiar inmediato, entre mi madre y mi hermano. Ideas políticas que también poco a poco empezaban a ser discutidas en mi grupo de amistades en mi barrio. Así, profundamente influenciado por mi madre y por el impacto que estaba produciendo en mí la politización vertiginosa de la juventud, empecé a interesarme y a buscar los medios de participación en esta transformación política de la sociedad chilena.

Santiago de Chile, 1970

Recién había cumplido 20 años y el mundo alrededor mío estaba en ebullición, todos tenían ideas, todos opinaban, la gente se organizaba y estaba dispuesto a demostrar que sus derechos debía ser tomados en cuenta. Chile se polarizaba a una velocidad abismante, yo me sentía lleno de ideas tan seguro de comprometer mi vida por las ideas políticas que hablaban de los derechos de los más pobres de nuestra sociedad. Quería una sociedad Socialista, una sociedad que transitara a ese ideal comunista donde a cada cual se le daba de acuerdo a sus necesidades. Una sociedad solidaria. Que rico era sentir esa sensación de seguridad en el futuro, todo podía conseguirse, bastaba la entrega completa al trabajo político y no había dudas en ese entonces que en un cercano futuro nuestros ideales se convertirían en una realidad. Pero en esta polarización de la sociedad los representantes de la derecha abrieron el espacio necesario para el surgimiento del fascismo, sus grupos ultraderechistas y el discurso que legalizaba la posibilidad de un golpe militar. La acción armada en contra de un gobierno que amparaba la movilización del pueblo.

Tantas tardes pase en casa de mi madre hablando del futuro de estos acontecimientos; tantas veces mi madre menciono al MIR ¹ como la única posibilidad de organizar una real resistencia a la posible claudicación de los sectores más reformistas de la Unidad Popular, y al avance de los sectores más golpistas de la derecha, creando una alternativa propia pero que a la vez pudiera ser el catalítico para grandes sectores pobres de la población. Una alternativa que a la vez de apoyar el gobierno de la UP² fuera preparando las bases para un enfrentamiento que inevitablemente iría a producirse debido a lo frágil que era el verdadero control de las estructuras del estado chileno por parte del pueblo y la UP.

¹ Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria

² La Unidad Popular, coalición de partidos de izquierda incluidos el partido socialista, el partido comunista, el partido radical el Mapu y otros.

Que voragine de acontecimientos se producian para una generacion tan joven como la mia, todo era secundario a los acontecimientos politicos , asi en este contexto empezo mi militancia politica con el MIR. El compromiso con mi militancia fue completo, deje de lado todos mis otros proyectos como mi postulacion a la escuela de Filosofia en el pedagogico y me dedique al trabajo de organizacion politica en los sectores obreros de la Granja y posteriormente al trabajo de organizacion poblacional en la tomas de terreno organizadas por el MIR. Para fines de 1972 gran parte de mi tiempo estaba dedicado a tareas internas de organizacion en el MIR, viaje a Cuba a varios encuentros siendo mi ultimo viaje a solo unos meses antes del golpe de estado.

El Golpe Militar, 11 de Septiembre 1973, Santiago Chile.

Me despierte sobresaltado al sentir los golpes en la puerta del garage donde dormia, convertido en una pequeña pieza de alojamiento con su cama, un estante para ropa y libros, una mesa con su maquina de escribir y muchos papeles, documentos y revistas desparramados por todas partes. Era la casa de Hernan Cortez casi al llegar a Pedro de Valdivia donde yo y Mary, mi compañera y la que seria la madre de mi hijo mayor Marcelo habiamos llegado a compartir con Frank Terrugi, David Hathaway y su companera Ita, chilena, militante del MIR y una pareja de Uruguayos militantes Tupamaros.

Los militares estan avanzando hacia la Moneda, se ha decretado el estado de sitio.

Que dura es la realidad y nunca se imagina en su totalidad hasta que te golpea defrente, es como si un sopor te envuelve y no se puede pensar claramente, que hacer . Tratamos de escuchar la radio y recordar lo que tantas veces hablamos pensando en ese Golpe que sabiamos en teoria que alguna vez vendria , pero que nunca se cree hasta que te golpea.

Abandonamos la casa con lo puesto, despues de quemar en el patio la mayor cantidad de documentos que pudimos, cada uno a las casas de contacto que teniamo previstas. Frank y David se fueron al ultimo o quizas nunca se fueron. La casa fue allanada y Frank fue asesinado posteriormente en el Estadio Nacional donde fue llevado con David, como bien lo cuenta Costa-Gavras en su pelicula "Missing" donde relata la desaparicion y asesinato de otro norteamericano que visitaba nuestra casa: Charles Horfman. David sobrevivio.

Ya no habrian noches de descanso, los miliatres nos habia arrebatado como un zarpaso la primavera que tardo tantos años en volver a nuestro pais.

Primer año de Dictadura

Que grande se sentia Santiago antes del golpe, que pequeño era ahora. Era una constante busqueda de gente que se atreviera a ayudarte, que valor de aquellos que te tendieron la mano para esconderte y ayudarte a ti y la resistencia que pensabamos oponer a la

Dictadura. Cuantas noches pasamos en tantas diferentes casas, casi siempre con algunos otros compañeros; aun eramos muchos y conversabamos y discutimos las ultimas noticias. En el dia, saliamos a tomar contactos para recibir informacion y cumplir con algunas tareas, pero poco a poco la represion comenzo su implacable caseria, muchas veces ayudados por delatores que recorrian Santiago en las camionetas de la DINA identificando compañeros. Que tensión era salir a la calle a encontrarse con alguien, nunca se sabia que iba a pasar. Siempre la incognita de si el encuentro se iba a producir, y si el contacto no llegaba que haríamos, que incertidumbre. Tantos compañeros/as cayeron en las manos de la DINA en esos puntos de contacto, y así viví eludiendo a la DINA hasta Septiembre de 1974.

La Caída en manos de la DINA

En medio de esta sobrevivencia bajo el toque de queda, sintiendo los helicopteros sobrevolar Santiago en las noches, fuimos construyendo algo parecido a una rutina de vida. Un simpatizante del MIR, amigo mio, un piloto de nacionalidad Costarricense nos dejó su apartamento donde vivía con su compañera chilena antes de partir a Costa Rica.

Ahi en la pura esquina de Grecia con Salvador diagonal a la panaderia que aun existe en la esquina, en el cuarto piso fuimos creando esa fragil rutina de vida. Allí concebimos a nuestro hijo Marcelo. Allí nos sentabamos a leer el diario en el pequeño balconcito que daba a Grecia, allí me leí novelas como la "Orquesta Roja" en la Europa ocupada por los nazis. Tantos días de salidas a conectarnos con otros compañeros, y cada vuelta al apartamento era un día mas de victoria, allí donde prepare tantos mensajes en diminuto papeles de cigarrillos para ser escondidos en envases de pasta de diente o jabones y ser mandados con la esperanza de aportar informacion politica a otros compañeros tambien escondidos en otras partes de esta ciudad; allí donde tomabamos onces con pan tostado; allí, por momentos;nos sentiamos seguros, felices, resistiendo.

Esa fragil rutina se rompió la noche del martes 3 de septiembre de 1974, cuando un grupo de la DINA al mando de Osvaldo Romo irrumpió en el departamento un poco despues del toque de queda. Mary tenía tres meses de embarazo.

Era un grupo de unas diez personas que allanaron el departamento. La casa de mi madre ya había sido allanada esa misma noche y ella había sido llevada a José Domingo Canas.

Encerraron a Mary en el baño, sentía sus quejidos y las amenazas. Me tendieron en el suelo del dormitorio y empezaron a interrogarme. Les dije que yo solo cuidaba ese apartamento para José Bordaz un miembro del Comité Central del MIR; encontraron las llaves de un Fiat de los que usaba la seguridad de Allende. Yo me aferraba a mi historia de que era solo un cuidador de confianza de ese departamento para el Comité Central del MIR, que las cosas que encontraron eran de José Bordaz, que no sabía donde estaba estacionado el automovil y que el vendría al apartamento en algún momento el próximo día, porque ya era toque de queda.

Que terror mas grande; todo esto no era mas que una historia, yo no tenia ningun contacto con Jose Bordaz, el no conocia este departamento y nunca vendria.

Me pegaron mucho, me insultaron, me amenazaban con violar a Mary encerrada en el baño; constantemente escuchaba "ve si encuentras unos alicates, le vamos a quebrar un par de dedos a este concha de su madre"; varias veces me pusieron un fusil en la espalda y gritaban "disparale ya, no perdamos mas tiempo". Esto debio durar como unas dos horas.

Jose Domingo Cañas (casa de torturas de la DINA)

Cuando nos bajaron del departamento nos vendaron la vista y nos subieron a una camioneta donde fuimos tirados al suelo. El miedo hacía que me sintiera tan mareado, me costaba pensar pero tenia chispazos de lucidez que me recordaban que debia de seguir con mi historia, sabia lo que venia , tantas veces habiamos hablado de las torturas, pero una parte en mi mente se resistia a aceptarlo.

El recorrido en la camioneta no fue muy largo, mas tarde supe que nos estaban llevando a la casa de torturas de Jose Domingo Cañas. Nos bajaron a empellones, al entrar creo que nos separaron mientras me ponian en una pequeña pieza donde habia una mesa con una maquina de escribir, estaban tomándole los datos a otra persona, que nunca supe quien fue, alli me habian quitado la venda de los ojos, luego me tomaron mis datos. Casi no podia hablar, tenia tanto miedo, tiritaba mucho. Luego me llevaron a una sala mas grande donde habia una silla, me volvieron a vendar la vista, estuve solo por un rato y luego senti que alguien se acercaba: era la "flaca Alejandra" Marcia Merino. Alejandra me conocia desde mucho tiempo, desde nuestro trabajo politico en las poblaciones, ella visitaba amenudo la casa de mi madre y teniamos una buena relacion de amistad. Yo siempre la admire mucho por su dedicacion e inteligencia, mi madre le tenía un afecto especial a ella. Con mis ojos vendados escuche cuando me hablo, su voz sonaba normal como tantas veces la recuerdo, me dijo "perdon chico, yo tuve que entregar a tu mama y a ti, sino me mataran, por favor entrega todos los contactos que tengas, hacelo por tu mama y Mary y por ti, es la unica manera de salvarse".

Yo me sentia muy mal, creo que hubiera podido desvanecerme en cualquier momento, extrañamente el sentir esa voz tan conocida para mi, era como una sensacion de proteccion, no estaba tan solo como me sentia. Pero en ese estado nebuloso de mi realidad, algo me decia "mantiene tu historia". Alejandra me tomo las manos cuando me hablaba, me repetia entregar todo para salvarnos. Yo le conte mi historia, y le dije que tenia terror que la DINA no me creyera, que no tenia contactos pero que Jose Bordaz llegaria al departamento en algun momento de mañana. Me dijo que hablaria con ellos.

Siempre vendado me llevaron a otra pieza mas grande donde habia un sofa, alli me encontré con Mary, nos sentaron en el sofa me sacaron la venda y nos dieron cafe que no pude tomar. Habia varia gente, incluido Osvaldo Romo, nos interrogaban y a la vez nos repetian que en esta guerra ya estabamos perdidos y lo mejor para todos era colaborar. De

repente el tono cambio, un teniente (asi se dirigian a el) empezo a gritar y a insultarnos, otros empezaron a gritarnos tambien. Nos pusieron la venda en los ojos denuevo y a empujones nos bajaron a un subteraneo, podia escuchar que habia otra gente, escuche quejidos y un corto llanto. Alli perdi la sensacion de lo que me rodeaba. No se por cuanto tiempo Mary estuvo junto a mi y cuando se la llevaron.

Me ordenaron que me quitara la ropa, casi no podia hacerlo, tiritaba mucho y estaba tan mareado que perdia el equilibrio muy amenudo. Me pegaron mucho, creo que con una goma muy dura, pero tambien a patadas sobre todo en los genitales. Me caia al suelo y me volvian a parar, siempre sujetandome entre dos de ellos. Yo escuchaba sus gritos y amenazas y el resoplido agitado de la respiracion de mis torturadores. Botado en el suelo, sentia que sangraba por la boca, mi respiracion era muy agitada y entrecortada, una punzada profunda se metia entre mis costillas y me producia arcadas y toz. Cuanto tiempo habia pasado no sabia, no podia pensar, me parecia una eternidad.

Creo que me dejaron solo por unos minutos, al volver me levantaron del piso y me pusieron en una cama de rejas de metal, me amarraron los pies, las rodillas, la cinturaron los brazos la cabeza. Me amarraron tan fuerte que sentia las barrillas de metal del catre incrustandose en mis tobillos.

Le tuve más miedo a esos momentos que a la misma muerte. Tiritaba tanto que el catre llegaba a sonar, senti como mi cuerpo dejaba de responderme, mi orina me mojaba las piernas, no podia controlarme. Escuche insultos y compañeros por los cuales se me preguntaba. Yo volvia a tratar de contar mi historia. Osvaldo Romo empezo a gritarme "te vamos a parrillar hijo de puta, hasta que te murai, si no hablai ". Senti el primer descargo de electricidad en los testiculos, fue un tremendo golpe a todos mis nervios, di un salto al tensar todos mis musculos. Y senti el segundo y el tercero y mi mente daba vueltas como en un remolino infernal, me mordi los labio y la lengua y a veces no podia ni siquiera gritar porque la voz no me salia, recibí la corriente electrica por muchas horas, habian momentos en que creo que me desvanecia estando mi cuerpo totalmente rígido, en esos momentos muchas veces tuvieron que golpearme el pecho con mucha fuerza para soltar el espasmo que no me permitia ni siquiera respirar, hubieron pausas donde senti que alguien me miraba, la venda los ojos se habia movido un poco, podia ver algunas siluetas, alguien me toco el pecho, senti conversaciones. Los insultos empezaron de nuevo, me mojaron con una toalla y empezaron a aplicar la picana de electricidad de nuevo, lo hacian en diferentes partes del cuerpo. Yo brincaba con cada descarga, a veces no podia casi respirar, me ahogaba sobre todo cuando la picana tocaba mi boca o cerca de mis ojos, la boca la tenia reseca y sentia que mi lengua me lleñaba la boca.

En varias ocasiones pararon la tortura, no se si salian de la pieza o se quedaban callados. Pero esos minutos eran los peores, parecian eternos y mi cuerpo parecia volver a despertarse, alli en esos minutos me daba cuenta tanto del horror que estaba viviendo, en esos minutos era mi mente la atorada, no puedo describir el miedo que sentia, el miedo a los pasos que volvian a la pieza, el miedo a volver a sentir los insultos, el miedo a la picana y al dolor que nuevamente comenzaria en cualquier minuto, pero sobretudo el terror de sentir esos pasos devuelta trayendo a Mary o a mi madre para ser torturadas delante de mi. En esa noche perdi la nocion del tiempo, me desvanecia y volvia al terror,

queriendo no recuperar la conciencia cuando la perdía. Fue la noche mas larga de mi vida.

Mi escape de la DINA

En algun momento de la madrugada senti que pararon los golpes de electricidad, mi cuerpo ya casi no respondia, sentia como me desamarraron y me bajaron de la parrilla, me mojaron para revivirme, y me vistieron. Apretaron la venda en los ojos y me llevaron entre dos a un auto que esperaba en la calle, senti como me sentaron en el asiento de atras y partieron. Volvi a estar mas conciente, empeze a tiritar de miedo y frio, hacia mucho frio, o sentia mucho frio. El auto paro y al rato me sacaron la venda de los ojos, estabamos estacionados en Grecia con Salvador, al lado de la panaderia de la esquina, justo al cruzar la calle al frente de mi departamento. Al lado mio estaba sentado Basclay Zapata el Troglo, y adelante al volante el tipo que me habia interrogado en la casa de Jose Domingo Canas, al que se referian como mi teniente. Este me empezo a amenazar, diciendome que iban a comprobar si estaba diciendo la verdad. Que iban a esperar a que llegara Jose Bordaz y que tenia que identificarlo al entrar al edificio. De vez en cuando se comunicaban por una radio al parecer con un grupo que estaria esperando arriba en el departamento. Que si eran mentiras lo que habia dicho, lo que me habian hecho la noche anterior no seria nada comparado con lo que me harian, no solo a mi sino a Mary y mi madre.

Mi mente empezo a dar vueltas, me estaban aterrorizando, no podia volver a la sala de torturas, nunca podria resistir ver la tortura de Mary o mi madre delante mio. Y no tenia escapatoria, nadie vendria a mi departamento porque nadie lo conocia. Creo que en ese momento estaba tomando la decision de morirme. Empeze a reafirmar que si, Jose Bordaz llegaria en cualquier momento al departamento, porque yo era parte de una celula de apoyo de confianza del Comité Central. Habian unos papeles en el asiento, los tome y dije , asi es como se configura el esquema de esta celula con el CC, y le pedi un lapiz para dibujar el esquema. Le devolvi los papeles y me quede con el lapiz. Paso como una hora, era muy temprano en la mañana, la panaderia estaba abriendo, habia muy poca gente en las calles, pero algunas entraron a la panaderia a comprar pan. Ellos tambien estaban cansados; Basclay Zapata casi dormitaba a mi lado, le veia la pistola bajo la camisa, pense por un minuto tratar de arrebatarsela. Entre en un estado de agitacion, presentia que iba hacer algo, estaba buscando, mirando a todos lados, estaba despierto y apretaba el lapiz en mis manos. El Troglo se sento mas derecho en el asiento, y al minuto dijo "teniente voy a comprar pan, solo un minuto" se bajo y entro a la panaderia.

Senti que tenia fiebre, mi cabeza daba vueltas y me sentia sofocado, pero supe que era ese momento en que tenia que actuar. Aprete el lapiz con toda la fuerza que me quedaba, el teniente estaba de lado al volante, con el brazo sobre el asiento. Levante mi brazo sobre el asiento y lo golpee con el lapiz a la altura del ojo derecho, senti el impacto del lapiz y mi puño en su cara, el lapiz se partio o porque entro al ojo o porque se estrello en el hueso

que lo rodea. Sentí un grito y una amenaza: “ahora si que la cagastes!”; tenía la pistola en la mano, no sé si siempre la tuvo allí, antes no me había dado cuenta. La agarré del cañón con una de mis manos, él no podía disparar, estaba como en shock nervioso, no pude quitársela, con la otra mano abrí la puerta y empecé a tratar de bajarme, no podía moverme, también estaba como en un shock. Me tuve que tirar fuera del auto, caí al pavimento, escuchaba gritos y quejidos del tipo en el auto, un camión había parado en frente de la panadería el chofer miró al auto levantó las manos y se quedó petrificado. Yo me levante y empecé a caminar como podía, cruzando la avenida Salvador empecé a caminar por avenida Grecia hacia el centro. No miré para atrás ni una vez, no podía, entre por la primera entrada al edificio de la esquina, pero no entre al edificio, pase sobre la reja de los jardines y seguí caminando hasta el próximo edificio, el corazón me saltaba en el pecho. Me encontré con la entrada creo que por la parte de atrás del segundo edificio y entre, subí las escaleras, eran edificios sin ascensor, cuando llegué al último piso encontré que había una entrada al entretecho, no sé ni me acuerdo cómo me subí al entretecho, pero lo hice, cerré la puertezuela y me senté contra una viga.

Pasaron muchas horas en que estuve inconciente, una vez que me senté en el piso de ese entretecho me desvanecí, horas más tarde me fui despertando, empecé a ver unos rayos de luz filtrándose por las juntas del techo, mi cara estaba contra el piso, no podía entender que estaba mirando o dónde estaba. Me dolía mucho el cuerpo, tenía mucho frío y tiritaba, pero mi cabeza estaba como ardiendo. Tenía mucha fiebre creo y me costó bastante rato incorporarme y realizar lo que había pasado, poco a poco empecé a pensar, no tenía ninguna idea de la hora o cuánto tiempo había estado allí. Traté de mirar por las juntas del techo, traté de escuchar, pero todo me parecía muy confuso, escuchaba sirenas, pasos y gente corriendo, quizás todo era mi imaginación, porque en realidad habían pasado muchas horas desde mi escape. Con el paso de las horas me fui calmando, me fui convenciendo que había escapado.

Cuando oscureció, decidí salir, necesitaba llegar a una casa de un ayudista a pedir ayuda, sino quedaría completamente aislado sin un lugar donde refugiarme. Bajé del entretecho y salí del edificio, estaba en avenida Grecia, vi un taxi y lo tomé, lo hice llevarme a la casa de esta familia ayudista, me bajé y lo hice esperar. Pedí plata para pagar el taxi y me senté en la mesa del comedor. Me preguntaron qué pasaba porque me veían en tan malas condiciones, me sirvieron té y algo de comer, me dieron una camisa para cambiarme y una chaqueta; estuve un rato para calmarme, les conté lo que estaba sucediendo, tuvieron mucho miedo. Al cabo de un rato me fui, conocía otro contacto era un zapatero que tenía un pequeño taller por la avenida Tobalaba, cerca de la casa donde estaba. Me fui a buscarlo y lo encontré cerrando el taller, le pedí que me dejara pasar la noche en el taller y le pedí que hiciera contacto con un compañero de mi estructura de trabajo. Esa noche casi no dormí, al otro día unos compañeros me vinieron a buscar y me llevaron a una casa de seguridad.

La Clandestinidad

Estuve en una casa de seguridad por lo menos un mes, la única salida fue a buscar el auto que había dejado en un estacionamiento cerca del departamento de Grecia. Me fui

tranquilizando y podía leer y trataba de dormir durante el día porque en las noches no podía hacerlo; el silencio me aterraba y cualquier ruido me parecía un allanamiento.

Estaba la mayor parte del tiempo solo, de vez en cuando un compañero que era mi contacto me venia a ver. La casa era de una vieja familia de izquierda, habia una abuela que sufría de alzheimer, nunca sabía si me iba a reconocer o no. Algunos días me esperaba en la planta baja con desayuno y era muy carinosa, otros días no me reconocía y me pregunta quien era yo, que hacía en su casa, que si estaba arreglando algo, ya debería de terminar e irme. Había una empleada que la tranquilizaba y le decía que yo era el sobrino que venía de fuera de Santiago (eso creía la empleada), ella reclamaba que no tenía ningún sobrino. Al rato se olvidaba de todo esto y se me acercaba a conversar y a contarme historias de Allende.

No supe nada de la suerte de Mary y mi madre por mucho tiempo, hasta que recibí conocimiento que habían sido trasladadas a Tres Alamos, estaban vivas y Mary aun estaba embarazada.

En Octubre de 1974 fui trasladado a una casa en el alto de la Reina. Esta casa la había alquilado Leonardo "Barba" Schneider, el cual al parecer ya estaba colaborando con la SIFA (fuerza aérea) y su objetivo principal era la Comisión Política del MIR; habían varios otros compañeros que llegaban esta casa. En Octubre 9 de 1974, Miguel Enriquez es asesinado por la DINA en una casa de la comuna de San Miguel. De ese enfrentamiento se escapa José Bordaz y llega a la casa de la Reina; solo está unas horas.

Esa noche hubo mucho movimiento de militares en el área, al otro día me trasladan a la casa de una doctora que ofreció su ayuda para protegerme. Durante esos días caen en mano de la DINA y SIFA muchos de mis contactos. Voy a vivir en esa casa hasta febrero de 1975, allí supe de la muerte de José Bordaz en manos de la SIFA, allí supe que había sido delatado por René Scheiner, allí supe que me había salvado una vez más porque Scheiner y la SIFA no estaban interesados en mí, era solo la DINA que me buscaba casi por razones personales.

Mi único contacto no volvió más a conectarme en la casa, espere unas semanas, no sabía que hacer, necesitaba salir de allí pero no tenía ningún lugar donde ir. Mi contacto había sido detenido por la DINA y su valentía me salvó la vida, nunca entregó la dirección de esta casa, pero yo aun no sabía esto. Durante mi estadía en esta casa, nació mi hijo Marcelo, el 18 de Enero de 1975. Salía en las noches a diferentes teléfonos públicos a llamar a casa de la madre a de Mary, solo hablaba unos segundos, solo quería saber si estaban bien. Me avisaron que habían sacado a Mary de Tres Alamos a dar a luz a Marcelo en una clínica privada, tantos pensamientos cruzaron por mi cabeza, como podría acercarme a esa clínica a mirarlo, a ver sus ojitos recién abiertos a este mundo acorralado por la represión y la infamia. Pero sabía que era una trampa, sabía que me estarían esperando.

Mi salida de Chile

En febrero de 1975 acepte pedir refugio en una embajada, la doctora que me albergaba exponiendo su propia seguridad me contacto con un companero que me asistio en mi entrada a la embajada del Ecuador. Fui llevado a una Iglesia donde ya habia un grupo de companeros esperando para ser trasladados a la embajada. En un momento del medio dia llegaron a buscarnos en un pequeno bus. Cruzamos Santiago hacia el barrio alto y despues de dar algunas vueltas en el barrio de la embajada, el bus se paro al frente de ella y nosotros salimos corriendo y trepamos por las rejas del jardin del frente y saltamos adentro. Carabineros llegaron al momento, pero ya estabamos adentro, creo que era un fin de semanas, me parece recordar que el lunes siguiente llego el embajador, hubieron gritos y amenazas y poco a poco la situación se fue tranquilizando.

Creo que fui uno de los primeros en salir de la embajada con destino al extranjero, la Cruz Roja Internacional vino a entrevistarme varias veces y me proporciono un salvoconducto para salir de Chile con la aprobacion de la dictadura. El consul de Costa Rica vino a visitarme a la embajada y me ofrecio refugio politico en su pais.

En algun momento de Marzo de 1975 me vinieron a buscar a la embajada el consul de Costa Rica y el representante de la Cruz Roja Internacional, viajamos en dos autos hacia el aeropuerto y fuimos seguidos todo el camino por un patrulla de carabineros y un auto con funcionarios de civil.

Una vez en el aeropuerto me llevaron a una sala donde revisaron los salvoconductos y autorizaciones para dejar el pais. Luego me hicieron salir por una puerta hacia la pista donde un bus me llevaria hasta el avion; sentia una extraña sensación al subirme al bus y sentir como este se ponía en marcha hacia el avion esperando en la loza del aeropuerto. Era una mezcla de nervios, miedo y en cierta forma la excitante esperanza de la libertad. Cuanto mas cerca estaba el avion mas fuerte era esa sensación que me envolvía, no mire ni una vez para atras, tenia mis ojos puestos en el avion, solo queria mirar hacia adelante. Cuando me sente en mi asiento y el avion empezó a tomar velocidad por la pista, mire como por ultima vez el aeropuerto de Chile, volvi mi vista hacia las montañas y mire los Andes y solo volvi mis ojos una vez mas para mirar Santiago envuelto en una penumbra de smog. Sentí un gran alivio una gran pena y un gran cansancio, creo que cerré mis ojos y por primera vez en tantos meses dormí profundamente.

Mi llegada a Costa Rica, el comienzo del Exilio

Llegue a Costa Rica donde se encontraba mi hermano, un hermoso pais con frontera al pacifico y al caribe . Allí me encontré con el sol y las palmeras , aun me tiritaban las rodillas y no dejaba de mirar sobre mi hombro; mis primeras semanas fueron un poco difíciles , tenia que sacarme los fantasmas que traía conmigo, aquellos que me perseguían para tomar venganza. Mi hermano fue sabio, me saco de San Jose (la capital) y me llevo a una bahía escondida en medio del caribe en la costa nor este de Costa Rica. No habia nadie, y digo nadie !! por dias solo vi unos pocos pescadores y la naturaleza, los monos, los animales de la selva , los peces y los corales. Las noches eran oscuras cuando no habia luna, y el bullicio de la selva se moría al irse el sol. Despues venias las estrellas, y

botado sobre mis espaldas las contemplaba hasta muy entrada la noche. Cuantas estrellas fugaces cruzaron el firmamento delante de mis ojos, que grande era el universo contemplado desde esas playas, que silencio mas profundo nos adormecia en la selva, que estrecho y cruel fue el ataque artero de la injusticia que me saco de mi pais . Me saque los fantasmas uno por uno, y camine por esas playas descalzo con el sol en el cuerpo y poco a poco las estrellas me volvieron a la cara.

En esos tiempos mi hermano era un artesano en cuero y me enseño a trabajarlo, alquilamos una casa en el barrio de Tibas, una casa de madera pintada amarilla, con una hamaca colgada en la puerta de entrada donde tantas veces dormi una siesta al sonido de la lluvia del tropico, alli hicimos un hogar, tuvimos nuestro taller y recibimos tanta gente a compartir un vino y un arroz con porotos negros y tortillas.

Meses mas tarde Mary fue expulsada de Chile y viajo a Venezuela, mi madre fue expulsada a Mexico, Marcelo fue retenido en Chile y entregado a su abuela, la mama de Mary, la cual pudo viajar finalmente a Costa Rica con Marcelo cuando conseguimos finalizar el tramite de reunificacion familiar a traves del Alto Comisionado para Refugiados de las Naciones Unidas. Alli en ese hermoso pais de Centro America tratamos de rehacer nuestras vidas, como individuos, como pareja , como familia. Pero nos habian pasados muchas cosas, las cicatrices eran muy profundas y nuestras vidas juntos no tuvieron mas la perspectiva del comienzo, solo nuestro hijo quedo como testigo de una relacion que fue soñada en una sociedad mas justa y hermosa.

Seis años vivi en Costa Rica, trabaje como artesano, estude en la universidad y me gradue con un Bachillerato en Sociologia, hice solidaridad con Nicaragua y trabaje desde el exterior con la resistencia en Chile. Viaje por las playas y volcanes acompañado muchas veces de Marcelo, vimos y corrimos tras los monos del Caribe, acampamos bajo las estrellas y nos bañamos en aguas templadas por el sol.

Pero la DINA aun no se conformaba con mi escapada de Jose Domingo Cañas y posteriormente de Chile. La DINA monto numerosas acciones en el exterior que culminaron con la muerte de Orlando Letelier, Prat y muchos compañeros secuestrados y asesinados en diferentes paises de Latino America. Enrique Arancibia Clave funcionario de la DINA y hoy dia esta cumpliendo prision en Argentina por el asesinato de Prat, cuando es detenido se le encuentra varias fotografias de militantes del MIR, entre ellas la de Andres Pascall Allende que estaba viviendo en Costa Rica despues de su salidad de Chile, y una foto de mi, supuestamente incluidos en un plan de asesinato como lo relata el libro "Bomba en una calle de Palermo".

Un dia de Enero de 1981 me ponía una mochila en la espalda y salía a la carretera principal con destino a Nicaragua, así comenzo mi viaje de algunos meses por Centro America, pasando por Nicaragua, Honduras, Belize, Mejico y finalmente Estados Unidos

Mi vida en New York

Llegue a Washington donde estaba viviendo mi hermano, que tambien habia dejado Costa Rica un poco antes de mi, estuve alli unas pocas semanas y viaje a New York desde donde tenia un pasaje de avion para ir a Europa. Me esperaba en New York un amigo , pintor Boliviano que me ofrecio su departamento donde alojar. Me fue a buscar a la estacion del tren, tomamos el tren subterraneo hacia el "upper west side" en Manhattan donde nos encontramos con un grupo de edificios abandonados en la calle Amsterdam Avenue y la calle 108. El saco una llave de su bolsillo y abrio una de las cadenas que cerraba unos de lo edificios. Entramos a un socabon oscuro buscando nuestro camino hacia una escalera que nos llevaria al cuarto piso. Al abrir la puerta de su apartamento y prender la luz , nos encontramos con un departamento hermoso, totalmente pintado de blanco donde sus murrallas estaban tapizadas de sus cuadros. Esta impresion fue mi primer encuentro con esta gran ciudad, de los rascacielos del centro a un edificio abandonado que albergaba un estudio lujoso de un pintor.

New York vivia aun el resultado de una de sus mas grandes crisis de vivienda de su historia, la cual habia dejado miles de propiedades abandonadas por sus dueños, despues de haber especulado con ellas, no pagando impuestos, cobrando seguros fraudulentos y dejando estos edificios en el mas completo abandono. Situacion que se genero en gran medida por la llegada de nuevos inmigrantes especialmente latinos pobres sin posibilidades de pagar los arriendos esperados por sus dueños y el crecimiento de las tazas de desempleo que dejaron a muchas familias residentes de esos edificios sin la posibilidad de pagar sus arriendos. Los dueños empezaron a especular y la ley tan solo podia despues de un largo y burocratico proceso tomar la propiedad de esos edificios, que a ese momento ya estaban en muy malas condiciones , semi abandonados o en completo deterioro de abandono.

Despues de una semana de estar viviendo en ese edificio, donde ademas habia un grupo que estaba tratando de rehabilitarlo, donde algunos de ellos ya vivian alli, otros solo venia a trabajar cada tarde o los fines de semanas mi interes por esta increible situacion que se producia en muchos lugares de esta ciudad me estaba fascinando. En ese entonces ya habian mas de diez mil propiedades abandonadas en esta gran ciudad, la ciudad mas rica del mundo.

El grupo que habitaba el edificio me ofrecio un piso para rehabilitar y un lugar en esta asociacion de *homestader*. Necesite unos segundos para decir acepto, me quedo en esta ciudad, vendi mi pasaje a Europa, y decidi re-construir un edificio y un departamento para mi en esta ciudad de gentes de todos lados.

New York vivia a una velocidad vertiginosa con sus miles de gentes en las calles, comprando , turisteando, pidiendo limosnas o paseando por la ciudad. Ciudad que nunca duerme con sus calles llenas de comercios, sus restaurantes, sus teatros y sus refugios para gente sin hogares. Pero sobre todo su gente, de todos lados, colores, olores, lenguas y niveles economicos. Ciudad de contrastes y contradicciones. Los mas ricos y los mas pobres. La soledad mas grande para algunos y la gran sensacion de comunidad para otros, ciudad de conflictos, represi3n racismo, brutalidad policial, modas, drogas y sexo. Ciudad de una tremenda solidaridad, donde la comunidad se organiza para defender un

edificio abandonado o un pedazo de tierra que ha estado abandonada por años y donde la gente de la comunidad ha dedicado sus vidas a plantar flores a crear un jardín. Los grandes intereses empezaron a ver el símbolo del dólar una vez que los intereses de bienes raíces comenzaron a descubrir estos lugares. La comunidad vio sus raíces culturales amenazadas, sus vidas diarias y el peligro de ser desplazados fuera de sus barrios. Esta ciudad se presentaba ante mí como una ciudad de lucha, una lucha por la sobrevivencia de tu espacio, ya sean terrenos vacíos convertidos en jardines o edificios abandonados convertidos en cooperativas de viviendas.

Un año después de estar viviendo en New York, trabajando cada día o fin de semanas en la re-construcción de este edificio, la organización que nos prestaba apoyo técnico y que finalmente fue instrumental en legalizar la situación de este edificio con la Municipalidad de la ciudad me ofreció un trabajo de organizador, principalmente en proyectos como este en los barrios latinos de la ciudad. Así empecé a trabajar para The Urban Homesteaders Assistance Board (UHAB), una organización sin fines de lucro (ONG), dedicada a desarrollar proyectos de cooperativa en edificios abandonados o semi abandonados con la tesis de que el factor principal estaba en la fuerza de sus residentes y la comunidad. Hoy día después de 23 años de trabajar en el desarrollo de la vivienda en esta ciudad para la misma organización UHAB, después de haber completado una maestría en Planificación Urbana y de haber ocupado diferentes posiciones en esta organización que de un puñado de personas ocupando solo dos piezas como oficina, se ha convertido en la organización (ONG) más grande de esta ciudad en el campo del desarrollo de la vivienda cooperativa para gentes de bajos ingresos. Hoy damos asistencia técnica, financiera y educacional a más de 1,200 cooperativas en esta ciudad, yo ocupo la posición de Director Asociado para el Departamento de Preservación Cooperativo de UHAB.

A través de los 23 años de trabajar con los sectores más necesitados en el campo de la vivienda he ido encontrando tantos paralelos con los años que trabajé políticamente organizando a los pobladores chilenos de los campamentos 26 de Enero, Magaly Honorato o La Bandera, durante el último año el gobierno de Frei y los años de la Unidad Popular. Estos paralelos han estrechado a lo largo de los años mi fuerte compromiso con los sectores mayoritarios de cualquier sociedad, los más pobres.

Mi Familia en New York

En Enero de 1990 llega a trabajar a mi oficina Sarah Hovde, una newyorkina hija de una familia de académicos, venía de trabajar con una organización (ONG) que daba asistencia a gente sin casa. Entra a trabajar conmigo en un proyecto que en ese entonces dirigía, trabajamos como colegas aproximadamente un año. Fue un placer trabajar con Sarah, comprometida con su trabajo y la gente que asistía, independiente, inteligente y con un sentido de entrega inigualable en el campo profesional. Me enamoré de ella, de su capacidad, su honradez, su inteligencia su generosidad y su sonrisa. Cocine para ella empanadas, langostinos al pilpil, torta de mil hojas, pan amasado, cazuelas, chacareros, porotos granados, sopaipillas, paellas, mariscadas, prepare guindaos hechos con aguardiente traídos de Chile, y un día viernes de invierno después del trabajo fuimos a

patinar en hielo y luego en mi pequeño departamento en las cercanías del “Central Park” le hable de un sueño incompleto, le conte de un mundo donde las casas no tenían techo, donde su gente dormía mirando la estrellas y al despertar el sol o la lluvia les bañaba la cara. Una casa sin techo, un mundo sin fronteras y una sociedad solidaria.

Seis años después nos casamos, en una ceremonia privada en el departamento del papa de Sarah, en Riverside Drive al frente del parque que lo separa del Hudson River. Jim Morton, el *dean* de la hermosa catedral de Saint John the Divine presidió la ceremonia y estuvimos acompañados por nuestros amigos y familiares. Ese día cocine para todos, hice más de 120 empanadas y brindamos por nosotros, por todos los que nos acompañaban y por nuestros sueños por cumplir.

Hoy día tenemos dos hijos, Lukas que tiene 7 años, travieso y dulce con su pelo rubio, sus ojos azules, la sonrisa de su madre y un cuerpecito parecido a mi hijo mayor Marcelo cuando era niño y Eva que tiene 5 años, inteligente y hermosa, con su piel más tostada, su pelo claro y enrizado, su carita parecida a tantas fotos de mi madre cuando era una niña.

Volviendo a Chile,

Pasaron 22 años antes de volver a Chile, pasaron 22 años de exilio impuesto por la dictadura militar, hasta que se me permitió y se me otorgó la libertad de poder volver a visitar mi país, mi familia, mis recuerdos. En enero de 1992 hacían veinte y dos años en que no vi como mi familia crecía, veinte y dos años en que no pude velar a mis muertos, mis abuelos con los cuales crecí y compartí la vida hasta el golpe.

Cuando el avión aterrizó en Santiago sentí tantas emociones, una alegría inmensa, una curiosidad de ver mi gente mi país, no pude dejar de recordar el miedo que sentía cuando deje Chile 22 años atrás, sobretodo cuando pase por aduanas. Los funcionarios de migración, las ventanillas, la cola para presentar el pasaporte, las preguntas sobre el destino de mi viaje. Pero Sarah iba conmigo, y sentí su mano todo el tiempo junto a la mía. Estaba cerrando un ciclo abierto tantos años atrás.

Hoy es diferente, viajamos todos juntos, los niños no pueden estar quietos, especialmente en los terminales de aeropuertos, corriendo, deslizándose por los interminables pasillos, riéndose y jugando como si estuviéramos en un gran campo de juegos. Hoy día nuestra preocupación es como mantenemos el caos de nuestra familia en orden.

El atentado a las Torres Gemelas, 11 de Septiembre 2001, New York

A las 8.30 de mañana me subí al tren subterráneo que viaja desde Brooklyn hasta Manhattan. Recién había dejado a mi hijo Lukas de tres años en su kinder. Eran un día hermoso, uno de esos días claros con cielos azules interminables. La estación del tren estaba llena de gente, era una mañana como cualquier otra en esta ciudad. Yo quizás el único chileno en esa estación pensaba en el bombardeo de la Moneda sucedido hacia 28

años atrás y lo que había sido mi vida en Chile. El resto absorbo en sus audífonos escuchando música, leyendo sus diarios o libros esperando impacientemente comenzar el agitado vivir de cada día.

A las nueve de la mañana el tren paro en "Broad Street" la primera estación en Manhattan, en la esquina de Wall Street donde está la Bolsa de Valores a algunas cuadras del Wall Trade Center. Las puertas del tren se abrieron y comenzamos a salir, tomamos la primera escalera al primer nivel antes de la calle, cuando un sonido estrepitoso como una explosión gigantesca sacudió la estación. Al llevar al primer nivel ya estaba entrando humo que más tarde cubriría toda esa parte de la ciudad. Qué ironía! Era un once de Septiembre de nuevo. La gente empezó a gritar y todos corrieron hacia las escaleras que van a la calle. Corrí con la gente, sin pensar demasiado, más bien actuando por instinto, como tantas veces lo hicimos el 11 de septiembre en Chile.

Al salir a la calle el cielo estaba cubierto por millones de papeles y el humo empezaba a bajar, más tarde ese humo negro no te dejaría ver más allá del largo de tu brazo, la gente que se apretujaba por salir de la estación, el pánico y los gritos apagados por el humo te hacía perder el sentido de la realidad. Qué pasaba? nadie sabía, nadie podía ver, empezaba a costar respirar. Camine, ni siquiera corría, sentía que estaba viviendo sensaciones que ya había vivido antes en mi vida, quizás cuando me escape de la DINA, tampoco corrí, solo caminé. Limpiándome los ojos constantemente y cubriéndome la boca con mi pañuelo caminé hacia el "east river" por wall street hacia donde estaba mi oficina. Cuando llegue escuchaba que había habido un accidente, parecía que un avión se había estrellado contra las torres, "no eran dos aviones, decían" !! tratamos de llamar por teléfono, pero los teléfonos estaban cortados, ni los celulares funcionaban, tampoco las computadoras. La administración del edificio nos entregó la información de lo que había pasado, había que evacuar el edificio. Mi bajada del tren subterráneo había coincidido con el choque del segundo avión contra las torres. Al poco rato una nueva explosión hizo resaca los cristales y otra nube negra que se podía ver desde mi ventana avanzaba como una tormenta, la primera torre se estaba desplomando.

El humo mezclado con los miles de desechos de esas torres gigantes estaban cayendo como una nieve implacable, apagando la luz y poco a poco el sonido. Era como un manto fatídico que te iba aplastando

Abandonamos el edificio y poco a poco en las mismas condiciones de oscuridad y con muchas dificultades para respirar los pocos que habíamos en mi oficina tratamos de buscar una salida hacia nuestras casas. Yo caminé hacia el norte, buscando el puente de Brooklyn para salir de Manhattan. Eran miles los que querían escapar de esa área por este puente, el terror se mostraba en la cara de la gente, en este once de septiembre nadie se esperaba el golpe de los aviones.

Cuando casi llegaba al centro del puente, donde se había disipado el humo y se podía ver en una vista panorámica todo el sur de la isla de Manhattan, me senté a descansar, la gente pasaba apresurada se sentía, gemidos, llantos otros iban callados. Allí sentado mirando esa gran ciudad puse mis ojos en la torre que aun estaba parada, vi sus llamas consumirla y en un instante un ruido roncó como el de un terremoto hizo explotar esa

torre gigantesca en millones de partículas , el cielo se cubrió una vez mas. Con ellas desaparecieron miles de seres humanos, una vez mas la vida se presentaba delante de mí con toda su fragilidad.

Todo había empezado una linda mañana azoleada al tomar mi tren de todos los días rumbo a mi trabajo.

Hoy despues de tantos años, New York 2006

A veces pienso que ha pasado toda una vida, otra veces solo me parece que ha sido solo ayer. Pero lo que es indudable es que en esta corta vida que hemos ido viviendo paso a paso, lo hemos hecho siempre con otra gente que nos ha acompañado en este viaje, nuestros antiguos conocidos, viejos amigos, familia, y todo un pueblo que fue reprimido, resistió y sobrevivió y hoy busca de nuevo su futuro. A veces, es un segundo; a veces son cien años, pero cada paso ha dejado una marca escondida bajo la piel o inscrustada en el corazón. No sería lo que soy hoy sin mi pasado, mis sueños hoy día , mi compromiso profesional, mis ideas políticas y mi familia son un resultado mas de mis experiencias pasadas que me formaron y anidaron mis experiencias presentes. Después de tantos años, soy tan diferente pero también soy el mismo. Hoy día cocino un “risotto” al vino blanco con porcini, cuando tenía 20 años estaba cocinando tallarines con pomarola en un pequeño cuarto que compartíamos unos cuatro compañeros en las cercanías de la Plaza Italia, pero ya estaba cocinando!! Porque como hoy día, amo sobretodo los pequeños rituales de la vida diaria, gracias a esos tallarines, gracias a ese compromiso, gracias a mi madre, a mi hermano, a mi familia, mis amigos del barrio donde crecí, gracias a mis amores de juventud y sobretodo gracias a mis compañeros y compañeras que dieron su vida en esta vida. Hoy sigo soñando, aportando a los mas necesitados y mi sonrisa es mas ancha gracias a mis hijos, Marcelo, Lukas, Eva y a mi esposa y compañera Sarah.

Fernando Adolfo Alarcon Ovando
New York, Octubre 2006.

TESTIMONY

Santiago, Chile, before 1970

I finished my secondary schooling in 1969 at the Luis Campino Institute for the Humanities. From then on I began to discover political ideas which were already being shouted from the streets of Santiago by the most dispossessed sectors of our society. We began to discuss these ideas within my immediate family, between my mother, my brother and myself. These ideas also gradually began to be discussed within my neighborhood group of friends. So, profoundly influenced by my mother and by the increasing politicization of my generation, I began to be interested and to look for ways to participate in this political transformation of the Chilean society.

Santiago, Chile, 1970

I was 20 years old, and the world around me was in upheaval, everyone had ideas, everyone had opinions, people organized and were ready to demonstrate that their rights should be heard and respected. Chile was becoming polarized at an astonishing pace, and I felt myself full of ideas, so sure of them that I was ready to devote my life to those political ideas that upheld the rights of the poorest members of society. I dream with a socialist society, a society of communities a society who can provide a way of living to everyone. A supportive society. How wonderful it was to feel confidence in the future, that anything could be accomplished, that it was enough to dedicate oneself completely to the political work at hand and there would be no doubt that in the near future our ideals would be converted to realities. But in that polarization of society, the representatives of the right wing opened the door for the growth of fascism, their ultra-right groups, and the discourse which validated the possibility of a military coup and the military action against a government which gave shelter to the mobilization of the people.

I spent many afternoons in my mother's house talking over the possible future of these developments; many times, my mother mentioned MIR¹ as the only possibility of organizing real resistance to the possible suppression of the most reform-minded wing of the Popular Unity coalition², and the advance of the most coup-minded sectors of the right. She saw the MIR as a tool to create an alternative in its own right, but also one which could catalyze large segments of the population – an alternative that would support the PU government but also prepare the way for an inevitable conflict, given the fragility of the government and people's actual control over the structures of the Chilean state.

For a generation as young as mine, it was like being caught up in a whirlpool of events, everything was secondary to political developments, and it was in this context that I began my political militancy with the MIR. My commitment to this militancy was

¹ Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR)

² Unidad Popular, coalition of several parties including the Socialist party, communist party, radical party, the movement of popular action (mapu) among others.

complete: I put aside other plans such as enrolling in the University to study Philosophy. I dedicated myself to political organizing among the working sections of La Granja³, and later worked with landless populations in the land takeovers organized by MIR. By the end of 1972, the largest part of my time was dedicated to internal MIR functions. In this capacity, I visited Cuba various times, country who was a strong supporter of the process in Chile. My last visit only a few months before the coup, was interrupted by the first attempt of a military coup organized by a group of military officers lead by Alberto Viaux, attempt that became called "el Tancazo" because started in a Motorized Unit in Santiago.

The Coup: September 11, 1973 – Santiago, Chile

I woke up with a jump on hearing pounding on the door of the garage where I slept. I had converted this garage into a tiny room with a bed, a shelf for clothes and books, a table with a type writer and many papers, documents and magazines spread all over. The house was at 2575 Hernan Cortez street, almost at the intersection of Pedro de Valdivia, which Mary the mother of my oldest son Marcelo and I shared with Frank Terrugi, David Hathaway and his girlfriend Ita (who was Chilean and a member of MIR) and an Uruguayan couple who were members of the Tupamaros exiles in Chile.

The military was advancing on La Moneda (the Presidential Palace), and a state of emergency had been declared.

Reality is hard, and it is impossible to totally imagine it until it hits you in the face. It is as if you are wrapped in lethargy, and can't think clearly what to do. We tried to listen to the radio and remember what we had talked about countless times, thinking about a coup which we knew in theory could come one day, but which it is impossible to believe until it hits you.

We left the house with the clothes on our backs, after burning in the patio all the papers and documents that we could. Each one of us went to one of the safe houses which we had previously established. Frank (make afoot note about Frank) and David left last, or maybe they never left. The house was raided by the militaries and Frank was later killed in the National Stadium where he was taken with David, as (film director) Costa-Gavras relates in his movie "Missing," which details the disappearance and murder of another north American who had visited our house: Charles Horman. David survived.

Now there were no longer restful nights – the military had snatched from us the spring which had taken so long to come to our country.

The First Year of Dictatorship

Santiago felt large before the coup, but very small now. It was a constant search for people who dared help you. Those that did were brave – those that lent a hand to hide you, and help you and the resistance movement that sought to oppose the dictatorship.

³ La Granja: working class neighborhood, industrial and residential

We spent many nights in different houses, almost always with other comrades – we were still many and we would talk and discuss the latest news. By day, we would go out to collect information and perform a few tasks, but little by little the repression began its implacable hunt, many times helped by informers who travelled around Santiago in the trucks of the DINA (the secret police), identifying people. Leaving the house to meet someone caused great tension – you never knew what might happen. It was never sure that a meeting would happen, and if the person did not show up, what uncertainty! So many comrades had fallen into the hands of the DINA making these contacts. So I lived evading the DINA until September of 1974.

Falling into the Hands of the DINA

Surviving under a state of emergency and curfew, hearing the helicopters fly over Santiago at night, we nonetheless constructed something like a routine. A MIR sympathizer friend of mine, a Costa Rican pilot, gave us the apartment where he had lived with his Chilean girlfriend before he left for Costa Rica.

There on the corner of Grecia and Salvador catty-corner from the bakery, which is still on the corner, on the fourth floor Mary and I created that fragile routine. There we conceived our son Marcelo. There we sat on the small balcony to read the newspaper. There I read novels such as the Red Orchestra set in Europe under Nazi occupation. Many days we left to meet comrades and every return to the apartment was one more victorious day. It was there that I prepared tiny messages on cigarette rolling papers to be hidden in toothpaste and tubes of soap and to be sent with the hope of sharing political information with other comrades hidden in other parts of the city; there we had tea with toast; there were moments we felt safe, happy, resisting.

The fragile routine was broken in the night of September 3 in 1974, when a group from the DINA, under the orders of Osvaldo Romo, burst into the apartment right after the beginning of curfew. Mary was three months pregnant.

Ten people broke into the apartment. My mother's was raided the same night and she was taken to Jose Domingo Cañas.

They locked Mary in the bathroom; I heard the yells and threats. They had me on the floor of the bedroom and they began to interrogate me. I told them that I was only caring for the apartment for José Bordaz, a member of MIR's Central Committee. They found keys to a Fiat of the kind that was used by President Allende's security team. I stuck to my story that I was only a trusted caretaker of the apartment for the Central Committee of the MIR, and that the things they found belonged to José Bordaz. I said I didn't know where his car was parked, but that he'd be by the apartment sometime tomorrow during the day because of the curfew.

What terror! Everything was a lie, I had no contact with José Bordaz, he didn't know about the apartment and he would never come.

They punched me a lot, they insulted me, and they threatened me with raping Mary who was locked in the kitchen. I heard incessantly, "find me some pliers we are going to break a couple of fingers on this motherfucker." Several times they put a gun in my back and yelled, "Shoot him! Let's not waste any more time." This must have lasted two hours.

Jose Domingo Cañas (The DINA's torture center)

When took us out of the apartment, they blindfolded us and threw us in back of a truck. The fear made me feel so dizzy that it was hard for me to think. I had flashes of lucidity where I remembered I should continue with my story. I knew what was coming because we had discussed torture often but some part of my mind resisted accepting it.

The truck's route wasn't long. Later I found out that we found out we were taken to the Jose Domingo Cañas torture center. They pushed us out of the truck. I think they separated us as we entered. They put me in a small room where there was a small table and a typewriter. They were taking someone else's information, I never found out who it was. They took off my blindfold and took my information. I almost couldn't speak because I was so scared and shivering intensely. Afterward they took me to a larger room with a chair and blindfolded me again. I was alone for a while but then I felt someone come near. It was "Skinny Alejandra" Marcia Merino. Alejandra had known me a long time; from the time we were doing political work in the poor neighborhoods around Santiago. She visited my mother's house often and we had a strong friendship. I always admired her dedication and intelligence. My mother had a special affection for her. While my eyes were covered I heard her speak to me. Her voice sounded normal just as I remembered hearing it so many times before. "I'm sorry, kiddo. I had to turn in your mother and you or they would have killed me. Please turn in the contacts you have; do it for your mother, for Mary and for you; it is the only way to save yourself."

I was feeling very bad and I think I could have fainted at anytime. Strangely, hearing such a familiar voice gave me a feeling of protection. I wasn't as alone as I felt. But in my cloudy state something said to me 'stick to your story.' Alejandra took my hands in hers as she spoke to me; she repeated that we must give up everything to save ourselves. I told her my story and I told her that I was terrified that the DINA wouldn't believe me. I had no contacts except Jose Bordaz who would be by the apartment sometime tomorrow. She told me that she would speak with them.

They took me, blindfolded as always, to another room where there was a sofa. There I met Mary. We sat on the sofa together. They took off my blindfold and they gave us coffee, which I couldn't drink. There were several people, including Osvaldo Romo. They interrogated us. They repeated in unison that in this war we were already lost and the best thing for everyone would be if we would collaborate. Suddenly their tone changed. A lieutenant (as they called him) started to yell and insult us, and the others began as well. They covered our eyes again. They marched us to a basement. I could hear there were other people. I heard moans and a short scream. There I lost consciousness of my surroundings. I don't know how long Mary was with me or when they took her away.

They ordered me to take off my clothes. I almost couldn't do it I was shivering so much and I so dizzy that I kept losing my balance. They hit me repeatedly; I think they used a hard rubber stick, but also kicked me, mostly in the groin. I fell down, but they picked me up again always holding me between the two of them. I heard their yells and threats and the heavy wheezing breath of my torturers. Thrown to the floor, I could feel my mouth bleeding, my breathing was labored. I had a sharp pain in deep between my ribs that caused me to retch and cough. I didn't know how much time passed, I couldn't think; it felt like an eternity.

I believe they left me for a few minutes. When they came back they pulled me off the floor and put me on cot made of metal bars. They bound me at the knees, waist, arms and head. They tied me so tightly that I felt the rods of the cot embedding themselves into my ankles.

I was more scared in those moments than of death itself. I was shivering so much that the cot rattled. I felt like my body stopped responding -- I wet myself, I couldn't control myself. I heard insults and the names of comrades they were asking me about. I tried to continue telling my story. Osvaldo Romo began screaming at me, "We are going to grill you, you son of a bitch, until you die if you won't talk." I felt the first current of electricity on my testicles. It was a huge shock to my nerves, I jerked as all of my muscles contracted. I felt a second and a third; my head spun like hellish whirlwind. I bit my lips and my tongue and at times I couldn't even yell because my voice wouldn't come out. I was shocked for many hours. There were moments when I passed out with my whole body rigid. Then they would have to repeatedly punch me hard in the chest so that I would come out of the spasm that did not even allow me to breathe. There were pauses where I felt someone looking at me. My blindfold had moved a little bit so I could see some silhouettes. Someone touched my chest. I could sense conversations. The insults began again, they wet me with a towel and started to shock me again. They did it to different parts of my body. I jumped at each shock, sometimes I could barely breathe. I choked the most when the electrodes touched my mouth or near my eye. My mouth was dry and I felt as if my tongue filled my mouth.

Several times they stopped the torture but they didn't leave the room, they just stayed quiet. But these moments were worse, it felt like an eternity. My body began to wake up and I realized the extent of the horror I was living. In those minutes my mind was tortured. I cannot describe the fear I felt, the fear of the footsteps returning to my room, the fear of suffering the abuse again, the fear of the shocks and that the pain would begin again at any moment, but above all the terror of sensing the footsteps returning with Mary or my mother to be tortured in front of me. I lost my sense of time that night, I passed out and returned to the terror, hoping not regain my consciousness when I lost it. That was the longest night of my life.

My Escape from the DINA

Sometime towards dawn I felt that they had stopped the electric shocks. My body no longer responded, but I felt them untie me and take me off the cot, wet me to revive me, and put my clothes back on. They tightened the blindfold, and two of them took me to a car which was waiting in the street. I felt them seat me in the back, and we drove off. I was beginning to be more conscious, and began to shiver from cold and fright – it was very cold, or I felt very cold. The car stopped and after a while they took the blindfold off. We were parked at the corner of Grecia and Salvador, next to the bakery, just across from the entrance to my apartment building. At my side was Basclay Zapata alias the “Troglo” (troglodyte), and in the driver’s seat the guy who had interrogated me at Jose Domingo Canas, who was referred to as “lieutenant.” He began to threaten me, saying that they were going to find out if I was telling the truth. They were going to wait for José Bordaz to show up, and I would have to identify him entering the building. From time to time, they communicated by radio – seemingly with a group waiting upstairs in the apartment. He said that if I had been lying to them, what they had done to me last night was nothing in comparison with what they would do to me – and not only me, but also Mary and my mother.

My mind began to whirl – I was terrified – I could not go back to the torture chamber and I would never be able to stand the sight of Mary or my mother being tortured in front of me. I had no escape – no one was coming to my apartment, because nobody knew about it.

I think at that moment I made up my mind to die. I began to repeat that yes, José Bordaz would show up at the apartment at any moment, because he was part of a cell supporting the Central Committee. There were some papers on the seat...I took them and said “here’s what the organizational diagram of the support cell looks like...” and asked them for a pen so I could draw it. I returned the papers to them, but kept the pen. More than an hour passed – it was very early in the morning, and the bakery was just opening. There were few people in the street, but a few entered the bakery to buy bread. My captors were tired as well – Basclay Zapata was almost asleep next to me. I saw his gun under his shirt, and I thought about trying to snatch it for a minute. I was in an agitated state – I knew I was going to do something. I was wide awake, looking all around for an opportunity, and had the pen clutched in my hand. El Troglo sat up straighter in the seat, and then a minute later said “lieutenant, I’m going to buy bread – I’ll be back in a minute.” He got out, and entered the bakery.

I felt feverish, my head was spinning and I felt like I was suffocating, but I knew this was the moment I had to act. I clutched the pen with all the strength I had left. The lieutenant was in the driver’s seat, with his arm on the seat. I raised my arm over the seat and hit him with the pencil at the height of his right eye. I felt the impact of the pen and my fist on his face. The pen broke – either because it entered the eye or broke on the bone surrounding it. I heard a yell, and a threat: “now you really fuck it up!” He had his gun in his hand – I don’t know if he had always had it there – I hadn’t noticed earlier. I grabbed the muzzle with one of my hands – he could not fire it – it was like he had gone

into shock – but I couldn't get it away from him. With my other hand, I opened the door and tried to get out, but I couldn't move; I, too, was in a state of shock. I had to throw myself out of the car, and fell to the ground. I heard yells and moans from the guy in the car...a truck had parked near the front of the bakery and the driver looked at the car, lifted his hands and stayed there, petrified. I got up, and began to walk as best I could. Crossing Salvador Avenue I began walking on Grecia towards the downtown. I did not look back once – I couldn't. I went in the entrance of the first building on the corner, but did not enter the building itself – I went along the garden fence to the second building. My heart was pounding. I found an entrance towards the back of the second building and went in. I went up the stairs – they were buildings without elevators – and when I got to the top floor I found that there was an entrance to a kind of attic. I don't recall how I got up there, but I did. I shut the door, and sat down against a girder.

I spent many hours unconscious. Once I sat down on the floor of that attic I fainted. Hours later I woke up, and saw rays of light filtering down through the roof joints. My face was on the floor – I could not understand what I was seeing or where I was. My body was hurting a great deal, I was very cold and shook, but my head was burning. I think I had a high fever, and it took me a long time to pull myself together and realize what had happened. Little by little I began to think. I had no idea what time it was, nor how much time I had spent there. I tried to peer out of the roof openings, I tried to listen, but everything seemed confused. I heard sirens, footsteps, and people running, but perhaps it was all in my imagination, because in reality many hours had gone by since my escape. As time went by I grew calmer, and more convinced that I had escaped.

When it grew dark, I decided to leave. I needed to get to a house of a sympathizer and ask for help; if not, I would be completely isolated and without anywhere to take refuge. I came down from the attic and out of the building – I was on Grecia avenue. I saw a taxi and took it, and had the driver take me to the house of a family of sympathizers. I got out, and asked the taxi to wait. I asked for money to pay for the taxi and I sat down at the dining room table. The family asked me what had happened and why I was in such bad shape – they gave me tea and something to eat, a shirt to change into and a jacket. I waited until I was calmer, then told them what had happened. They were very frightened. After a while I left – I knew of another contact, a shoemaker who had a small store near Tobalaba avenue, near the house where I was. I went to find him, and found him closing his store. I asked him if I could spend the night in the store, and asked him to contact another comrade who was part of my organization. That night I almost did not sleep. The next day, several comrades came to get me and took me to a safe house.

In Hiding

I was in the safe house for at least a month. The only time I left was to get the car that had been left in a parking lot near the apartment on Grecia avenue. I grew calmer, and could read and tried to sleep during the day, as I could not at night – the silence terrified me and the slightest noise seemed like a break-in.

I was alone most of the time, although once in a while a comrade who was my contact came to see me. The house belonged to an old leftist family. There was a grandmother who suffered from Alzheimer's, and I never knew if she would recognize me or not. Some days she was waiting for me on the ground floor with my breakfast and was very kind; other days she didn't recognize me and asked who I was, what I was doing in her house, if I was fixing something I should finish and leave. There was a maid who would calm her and say that I was a nephew who came from outside Santiago (this is what the maid believed), and she would object that she didn't have a nephew. After a while she would forget about it altogether and would approach me to talk, and tell me stories about Allende.

I had no idea what had happened to Mary or my mother for quite some time, until I finally received word that they had been moved to a concentrate camp name "Tres Alamos". They were alive, and Mary was still pregnant.

In October of 1974 I was transferred to a house in the high part of the city in a neighborhood call "la Reina". This house had been rented by Leonardo "Barba" Schneider, who must have been (secretly) collaborating with the SIFA (airforce) at that time, and whose principal objective was the Political Commission of MIR. There were various other comrades who arrived at the house. On October 9, 1974, Miguel Enriquez was assassinated by the DINA in a house in San Miguel. José Bordaz escaped from that incident and arrived at the house in Reina, only staying a few hours.

That night there was a lot of military activity in the area, and the next day I was transferred to the house of a doctor who had offered her help in protecting me. In the next few weeks many of my contacts fell into the hands of the DINA and the SIFA (air force). I lived in this house until February of 1975, and there I heard of José Bordaz's death at the hands of the SIFA. I also learned he was turned in by Rene Scheiner, and knew that I had only managed to escape again because Scheiner and the SIFA were not interested in me – only the DINA was looking for me, almost for personal reasons.

My only contact ceased to contact me at the house. I waited a few weeks; I was not sure what to do – I needed to leave, but I had nowhere to go. My contact had been detained by the DINA, and his bravery saved my life, he did not reveal the address of the house, but I did not yet know that. During my stay at that house, my son Marcelo was born, on January 18, 1975. I went out at night to different public phones to call the house of Mary's mother. We only talked for a few seconds; I wanted only to hear that they were well. She told me that they had taken Mary out of the Tres Alamos (concentration camp) to a private clinic to give birth. So many thoughts crossed my mind – whether I could get to the clinic and see my son, to see his little eyes just open to this world encircled by repression and disgrace. But I knew it was a trap – I knew they would be waiting for me.

My Departure from Chile

In February of 1975 I agreed to ask for political asylum at an embassy in order to leave the country. The doctor who had housed me risked her own security and put me in

contact with a comrade who helped me get into the Embassy of Ecuador. I was taken to a church, where there was already a group of people waiting to be transported to the embassy. At noon, a small bus came to pick us up. We traversed Santiago towards the heights, and after driving in circles around the embassy neighborhood a couple of times, the bus stopped in front. We jumped out and began to run, climbing over the garden fence in the front and jumping inside. A bunch of police arrived a moment later, but we were already inside. I think it was on a weekend – I remember the ambassador arriving on the next Monday – there were yells and threats, but gradually the situation grew calmer.

I think I was one of the first to leave the embassy for exile abroad. The Red Cross came and interviewed me several times and gave me a safe-conduct to leave Chile with the approval of the dictatorship. The consul for Costa Rica came to visit and interview me at the embassy, and offered me political asylum in that country.

Sometime in March of 1975 the consul for Costa Rica and the representative of the International Red Cross came to the embassy to get me. We travelled in two cars to the airport, and were followed the whole time by a police car and another with civil servants.

Once at the airport, they took me to a room where they inspected the safe-conduct and other papers authorizing me to leave the country. Then, they had me go through a door to the tarmac, where a bus took me to an airplane; I felt a strange sensation on getting into the bus and feeling it leaving for the waiting plane. It was a mix of nerves, fear, and a certain excitement and hopeful expectation of liberty. As we got closer to the plane, the sensation got stronger. I did not look back once – my eyes were on the plane and I only wanted to look ahead. When I sat down in my seat and the plane began to speed up on the runway, I looked at the airport for the last time. I turned my gaze to the mountains, and looked at the Andes – and only once more turned back to look at Santiago covered in the smoggy haze. I felt enormous relief, and pain, and exhaustion. I think I shut my eyes and for the first time in many months slept deeply.

My Arrival in Costa Rica and Beginning of Exile

I arrived in Costa Rica – a lovely country facing both the Pacific and the Caribbean – and I was met by my brother. There I encountered sun and palm trees – but my knees still shook and I could not stop glancing over my shoulder. The first few weeks were hard – I had to get rid of the ghosts I had brought with me...those that pursued me in revenge. My brother was smart – he took me out of San José (the capital) and took me to a little bay hidden in the middle of the Northeast Caribbean coast of Costa Rica. There was no one there – and I mean no one! For days I only saw a few fishermen and nature – monkeys, jungle animals, fish and coral. The nights were dark when there was no moon, and the hubbub of the jungle died away at nightfall. Then the stars came out, and I would watch them lying on my back until late at night. Many falling stars crossed the heavens under my gaze – from the beach the universe appeared very large, the silence of the sleeping jungle very profound. An one by one, I got rid of the ghosts, and I walked

barefoot on those beaches with the sun on my body and little by little the stars came back to my face.

At that time, my brother was working as a leather-worker, and he taught me his craft. We rented a house in the Tibas neighborhood, a wooden house painted yellow, with a hammock hung in the entry-way where I would often take a nap to the sound of the tropical rain falling. There we made a home, we had our workshop, and we invited people over to share wine and rice and beans and tortillas.

Some months later, Mary was exiled from Chile, and travelled to Venezuela; my mother was exiled to Mexico; Marcelo was detained in Chile and given to his grandmother, Mary's mother, who was finally able to bring him to Costa Rica when we completed a family reunification request with the UN High Commission for Refugees. There, in that beautiful Central American country, we tried to recreate our lives – as individuals, as a couple, and as a family. But many things had happened to us. The wounds were very deep, and our lives together no longer had the same perspective that they had at first. Only our son remained as witness to a relationship which was dreamed of in a more just and beautiful society.

I lived in Costa Rica six years, working as an artisan, and studying at the University. I graduated with a BA in sociology; I became a supporter of Nicaragua's (struggle) and I worked from abroad with the resistance movement in Chile. I travelled the beaches and volcanoes many times accompanied by Marcelo; we would spot and run after the caribbean monkeys, camp under the stars and swim in waters warmed by the sun.

But the DINA would not accept my escape from Jose Domingo Cañas and subsequent escape from Chile. The DINA was involved in many operations outside of Chile, which culminated with the death of Orlando Letelier, Prat, and many comrades hidden in different countries in Latin America and subsequently murdered. Enrique Arancibia Clave was a DINA operative who is currently serving a prison sentence in Argentina for the murder of Prat. When he was detained, he had on him various photographs of members of the MIR. Among these was one of Andres Pascall Allende, who was living in Costa Rica after he left Chile, and one of me – we were supposedly targets of a assassination plan, as discussed in the book "Bomba en una calle de Palermo" (Bomb in Palermo Street).

One January day in 1981 I put a backpack on my shoulders and left via the main road for Nicaragua. So began a trip of various months through Central America – passing through Nicaragua, Honduras, Belize, Mexico, and finally the United States.

My Life in New York

I got to Washington where my brother was living – he had left Costa Rica a little earlier than I – and stayed a few weeks before travelling to New York, from where I had a ticket to Europe. I had a friend waiting for me in New York, a Bolivian painter who offered me a place to stay in his apartment. He came to get me at the train station – we took the

subway to the upper west side of Manhattan, where we came to an abandoned group of buildings on Amsterdam Avenue and 108th street. He took a key from his pocket and opened the chains that locked the entrance to one of the buildings. We went into a dark entryway, feeling our way towards a staircase up to the fourth floor. When the door to the apartment was opened and the light turned on, we found a beautiful apartment, with walls painted white and adorned with his pictures. That impression was my first of this great city, from the skyscrapers of the downtown to an abandoned building that housed a luxurious painter's studio.

At that time New York was still going through one of its worst housing crises, in which thousands of properties were abandoned by owners who had speculated in real estate, failed to pay taxes, filed fraudulent insurance claims and left buildings completely forsaken. This situation was brought on in part by the arrival of new immigrant groups, particularly poor Hispanic ones, who did not have the means to pay the rents anticipated by building owners and whose situation was complicated by increasing unemployment rates which left many of them living in buildings unable to pay rent. Owners began to speculate, not paying taxes or insurance and legally these buildings could not be foreclosed until a long and arduous bureaucratic process were completed by the City. Meantime, the buildings themselves were in very bad condition, semi-abandoned or completely empty and deteriorated.

In the building in which I was staying there was a group trying to renovate it – some who lived there, and others who came in the afternoons or on the weekends. After a week of living there, I grew fascinated by this situation prevailing in many parts of the city. At the time, there were more than ten thousand abandoned properties in this great city – the richest city in the world.

The group working on the building I was staying in offered me a floor to renovate, and a membership in the "homesteader" association. I needed only a few seconds to say "I accept – I will stay in this city." I sold my ticket to Europe originally my destination, and decided to re-build a building and apartment for myself in this city populated by people from everywhere.

New York life was dizzying in its speed, with its thousands of people in the streets, buying, sightseeing, begging, or simply out for a walk. A city that never sleeps with its streets full of businesses, restaurants, theatres, and homeless shelters. But above all the people – from different places, colors, smells, languages, and economic classes. A city of contrasts and contradictions: the richest and poorest; for some a sense of isolation, for others a sense of community. It was a city of conflict as well: racial repression, police brutality, fashion, drugs and sex. A city of great community spirit, in which a group would organize to defend an abandoned building or a piece of land abandoned for years and where community members dedicated their lives to planting flowers or creating a garden. Once those well intentioned people began to discover these places, large economic interests began to see dollar signs. The community saw its cultural roots and daily lives threatened, and the danger of being displaced from their neighborhoods. The city seemed to me like a city engaged in a struggle – a struggle to preserve one's space,

whether abandoned land converted into a garden or abandoned building converted into housing cooperatives.

After one year living in New York, working each day or on the weekends in the renovation of this building, I was offered a job as an organizer by the organization which gave us technical support, and which had been instrumental in legalizing the building's status with the City government. The job involved organizing communities very much like the one I was working in Chile, principally in Hispanic neighborhoods of the city. So I began to work with the Urban Homesteaders Assistance Board (UHAB), a non-profit organization dedicated to developing cooperative housing projects in abandoned or semi-abandoned buildings, and which theorized that the principal factor for success rested with the strength of residents and the community. Today, after 23 years of working in housing development in this city for the same organization (UHAB), after completing a master's degree in Urban Planning and having held various positions in this organization, it has grown from a fistful of people occupying a two room office space to the largest housing organization in the city dedicated to the development of cooperative housing for low income individuals. Today we offer technical assistance, financial, and educational assistance to more than 1,200 cooperatives in the city. I currently hold the position of Associate Director for the Department of Cooperative Preservation.

Through the 23 years of working with low income communities in the area of housing I have encountered many parallels with my work organizing in Chile – in the land takeovers of January 26th, Magaly Honorato or La Bandera, in the last years of the Frei government and the early years of Popular Unity. Over the years these parallels have strengthened my commitment to the largest sector of any society – the poorest.

My Family in New York

In January 1990, Sarah Hovde was hired to work in my office. A native New Yorker, daughter of an academic family, she had been working most recently for a non-profit providing assistance to the homeless. She started working with me on a project that I managed at the time, and we worked as colleagues for about a year. It was a pleasure to work with Sarah. She was dedicated to the work and to the people she was assisting and was independent, intelligent and had an un-equalled sense of professional commitment. I fell in love with her – with her capability, integrity, intelligence, generosity, and her smile. I cooked for her – empanadas, langostinos al pilpil, torta de mil hojas, pan amasado, cazuelas, chacareros, porotos Granados, sopaipillas, paellas, mariscadas. I prepared guindaos with aguardiente brought from Chile, and one winter Friday afternoon we went skating after work. Afterwards, in my small apartment near Central Park I told her about a dream I had, still incomplete, of a world where houses did not have roofs, people slept under the stars and woke with the sun or rain on their face. A house without a roof, a world without frontiers, and a supportive society.

Six years later we were married, in a small private ceremony in Sarah's father's apartment on Riverside Drive, facing the park that separates the drive from the Hudson River. Jim Morton, the Dean of the beautiful cathedral of Saint John the Divine, presided

at the ceremony, attended by our family and friends. That day I cooked for everyone – I made more than 120 empanadas and we toasted ourselves, all who were there, and our dreams for the future.

Today, we have two children – Lukas, who is seven years old, blond, blue-eyed and mischievous, with his mother's smile and body similar to my older son Marcelo when he was small, and Eva, who is five years old, intelligent and beautiful, with olive skin, light brown curly hair, her little face resembling so many pictures of my mother when she was a girl.

Returning to Chile

Twenty-two years passed before I returned to Chile – 22 years of exile imposed by the military dictatorship, until they finally gave me permission and the liberty of returning to see my country, my family, my memories. In January of 1992, it had been 21 years since I had not seen how my family grew, 21 years during which I could not (honor) my dead, my grandparents with whom I grew up and with whom I shared my life until the coup.

When the plane landed in Santiago, I felt so many emotions – huge happiness, curiosity to see my people and country, but at the same time I could not forget the fright I felt when I had left Chile 22 years before, especially when I went through customs. The immigration officials, the little windows and lines for presenting passports, the questions about the reason for my visit, (all brought that fear back). But Sarah was with me, and I felt her hand in mine the whole time. A cycle opened so many years before was closing.

Today, it is different – we travel as a family, and the kids can't keep quiet, especially in the airport terminals – they run, slide down the interminable passages, laughing and playing as if we are in an amusement park. Nowadays, our main worry is how to keep the chaos of our family in check.

The Attack on the Twin Towers, 11 September 2001, New York

At 8:30 in the morning, I got into the subway which runs from Brooklyn to Manhattan. I had just left off my son Lukas at his pre-school. It was a beautiful day, one of those clear days with endless blue skies. The train station was full of people – it was a morning like any other in the city. I was perhaps the only Chilean in the station reflecting on the attack on the presidential mansion of La Moneda 28 years earlier, and wondering what my life in Chile might have been like. Other passengers were absorbed in their music, headphones on, reading their papers or books, or waiting impatiently to begin their hectic daily routines.

At nine in the morning the train stopped at Broad Street, the first station in Manhattan, at the corner of Wall Street, where the Stock Exchange is, and a few blocks from the World Trade Center. The doors of the train opened and we began to exit – we took the first staircase up to the floor directly under the street when a deafening sound like a gigantic explosion shook the station. Reaching the next level, I saw the smoke and dust that

would later cover that entire area already entering the station. What irony! It was September 11th once again. People began to shout and everyone ran towards the stairs leading to the street. I ran with the crowd, not thinking too much, acting on instinct as so many times we had done on September 11th in Chile.

When we reached the street, the sky was covered with thousands of papers and the smoke began to fall. Later, this black smoke would make it impossible to see beyond your arm. The people pushing to get out of the station, the panic and shouts muffled by the smoke caused one to lose a sense of reality. What was happening? No one knew, no one could see, it was beginning to be difficult to breathe. I walked, not even running, feeling that I was re-living things I had experienced before, maybe when I escaped from the DINA. Then too, I had not run, only walked. Wiping my eyes constantly and covering my mouth with a handkerchief I walked to the East River on Wall Street, where my office was located. When I got there, I heard there had been an accident – apparently a plane had crashed into the towers – “no, they said it was two planes!” We tried to use the telephone, but none of them worked – not even the cell phones were working, or the computers. The building management gave us information on what had happened and told us to evacuate the building. My getting off the subway had coincided with the crash of the second plane against the tower. Soon after, a new explosion shook the windows and another black cloud could be seen from my window advancing like a storm – the first tower was collapsing.

The smoke mixed with the thousands of pieces from those giant towers was coming down like an implacable snowfall, blocking the light and little by little, sound. It was like a evil blanket that would crush you.

We left the building, and little by little, in that darkness and with great difficulty breathing, the few of us from my office tried to find a way back to our homes. I walked to the north, towards the Brooklyn Bridge to get out of Manhattan. There were thousands of people who were trying to escape from that area via the bridge – the terror was obvious on people’s faces. That September 11th no one expected the attack of the planes.

When I had almost reached the center of the bridge, where the smoke had dissipated and there was a panoramic view of the lower part of Manhattan, I sat down to rest. People passed in a hurry – some moaning, some crying, others silent. Sitting there, looking at this great city, I watched the tower still standing. I saw flames consuming it, and in an instant a low hoarse sound like an earthquake exploded the gigantic tower into millions of pieces, and the sky was covered once again. With them disappeared thousands of human beings, and once again life appeared to me in all its fragility. All had happened on a beautiful blue-sky day, when taking my daily train to work.

After So Many Years, New York 2006

Sometimes I think a lifetime has passed, sometimes it seems to me things happened yesterday. But it is indisputable that in this short life that we live, step by step, we always do so with others who have accompanied us on the journey – old acquaintances,

old friends, family, and an entire people who have been repressed, who resisted and survived and now seek their future again. Sometimes it is a second; sometimes a hundred years, but each step has left a mark hidden under the skin or inlaid in the heart. I would not be what I am now without my past; my dreams today, my professional commitment, my political ideas and my family are a result of past experiences that formed me and shelter my current experiences. After so many years, I am so different – but I am also the same. These days I cook risotto with white wine and porcini mushrooms; when I was 20, I was cooking spaghetti with sauce in a small room I shared with four roommates near the Plaza Italia, but I was already cooking! Because like today, I have always loved the small rituals of every day life. Thanks be to the spaghetti, to commitment, to my mother, my brother, my family, the friends from my neighborhood I grew up with. Thanks be for the loves of my youth and above all for my comrades, men and women who gave their lives in this life. Today I continue dreaming, (helping/guiding/providing shelter to) those who need it most, and my smile is broader thanks to my children – Marcelo, Lukas, Eva – and my wife and companion, Sarah.

Fernando Adolfo Alarcón Ovando
New York, October 2006