

“The dictatorship is a colossus on fragile feet”

Remembering the movement against torture “Sebastián Acevedo” in Chile

by Rainer Huhle, July 2012*

In September 1987 the government of General Pinochet, having seized power by coup d'état in 1973, signed the 'UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment'. The convention, outlawing all forms of torture while binding states to do everything to prevent and punish such acts, had entered into force only three months prior to that. Chile's dictator was thus among the first to sign this treaty, which has been ratified by 150 states today.

<p>Yo te nombro.</p> <p>Por el pájaro enjaulado por el pez en la pecera por mi amigo que está preso porque ha dicho lo que piensa por las flores arrancadas por la yerba pisoteada por los árboles podados por los cuerpos torturados</p> <p>Yo te nombro ...Libertad</p> <p>Por los dientes apretados por la rabia contenida por el nudo en la garganta por las bocas que no cantan por el beso clandestino por el verso censurado por el joven exiliado por los nombres prohibidos</p> <p>Yo te nombro ...Libertad !</p> <p>Te nombro en nombre de todos por tu nombre verdadero te nombro y cuando oscurece cuando nadie me ve escribo tu nombre en las paredes de mi ciudad escribo tu nombre en las paredes de mi ciudad tu nombre verdadero tu nombre y otros nombres, que no nombro, por temor.</p>	<p>Por la idea perseguida por los golpes recibidos por aquél que no resiste por aquellos que se esconden por el miedo que te tienen por tus pasos que vigilan por la forma en que te atacan por los hijos que te matan</p> <p>Yo te nombro...Libertad !</p> <p>Por las tierras invadidas por los pueblos conquistados por la gente sometida por los hombres explotados por los muertos en la hoguera por el justo ajusticiado por el héroe asesinado por los fuegos apagados</p> <p>Yo te nombro Libertad !</p> <p>Te nombro en nombre de todos por tu nombre verdadero te nombro y cuando oscurece cuando nadie me ve escribo tu nombre en las paredes de mi ciudad escribo tu nombre en las paredes de mi ciudad tu nombre verdadero tu nombre y otros nombres que no nombro, por temor</p> <p>Yo te nombro ...Libertad !</p>
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In these months I visited Chile a few times and my memories do not fit to that at all. Time and again demonstrations against torture were held on the central streets of Santiago. They were meticulously prepared protest campaigns at known torture sites, during which the central streets and plazas were blocked for an accurately calculated amount of time, while the sympathising media documented these acts of protest. The song that was intoned by the protesters on

each of these occasions is unforgettable: *Yo te nombro, Libertad – I call on you, freedom*, the first verse of which ends with 'for the tortured bodies'.¹

Behind these acts was one of the most extraordinary movements that I have seen in decades. It named itself 'Movement Against Torture Sebastián Acevedo' – MCTSA, after the father of a torture victim who burnt himself out of exasperation in 1983 in Concepción in the south of Chile, after he had spent the entire day seeking information from the police about the whereabouts of his children in vain, had finally given an ultimatum and had announced his death. His suicide shocked the country and deeply impacted and shaped the movement against torture.²



Sebastián Acevedo's tomb in Lota near Concepción (Foto: Rainer Huhle)

The MCTSA was no fixed organisation but a loose association of highly motivated individuals who were partly members of other organisations but also partly came to the movement directly. Their acts brought the human rights protests to a new level. They particularly aimed for a maximum symbolic impact yet simultaneously produced concrete and tangible accusations against torturers and their supporters. Their campaigns were mostly meticulously prepared in small groups, as well as coordinated with domestic and foreign press representatives, and they demanded a high degree of personal courage, creativity and discipline. Reactions by the police were sidestepped cleverly and at times in an almost playful way. Non-violent protest against extreme violence – MCTSA met this challenge brilliantly with each of their actions.

¹ The song is a free adaptation of the poem 'Liberté' with which the French poet and resistance fighter Paul Éluard opened his little volume of poetry *Poésie et Vérité* (new edition 2012 by Editions de Minuit in Paris). The new version that was rewritten for Latin America as 'Yo te nombro ... Libertad' originates from the Italian songwriter Gian Franco Pagliaro and was recorded on CD on several occasions, the arguably most beautiful version by Isabel Aldunate. She still performs the song in Chile to this day. A live recording from the memorial service for the victims of Pinochet's dictatorship 2010 can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuSRMQYEFfo>. The CD is unfortunately out of stock, but the studio recording can be found at <http://www.goeear.com/listen/2f09d16/yo-te-nombro-libertad-isabel-aldunate>.

² More about that in Hernán Vidal: *El Movimiento contra la tortura "Sebastián Acevedo". Derechos Humanos y la producción de símbolos nacionales bajo el fascismo chileno*, Edina (Minnesota) 1986.

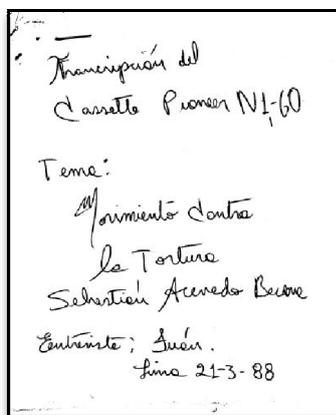
Non-violent fighting is, it cannot be repeated often enough, first of all fighting. To lead this fight against a dictatorial regime without the use of force but with the determination to overcome it was for MCTSA, as for all other non-violent activists, not about seeking martyrdom. MCTSA's chose this one martyrdom, the suicide of a father, as a powerful symbol leading its fight. However, the movement did not share the means of this desperate father who had called for help everywhere and received none. The path of non-violent resistance was not supposed to lead to violence against oneself. "Every one of us has to be aware that we also risk our lives at each of our protests." Juan Cortés, a young man I met at one of these demonstrations, told me once: "Shots can be fired, a tear gas grenade can hit your head, you can suffer a skull fracture from the clubs." Yet it is absolutely necessary to say NO, no to the dictatorship, to torture and all its inhumanity. And that is why, Juan continued, "I actually do not really like the term 'NO-violencia', the negation of violence, because of this negative word NO. Violence is already negation, is it not?" The movement AGAINST torture wanted to be and was first and foremost a movement FOR life, for a culture of life against the cult of death that the regime fostered, emulating Pinochet's idols in Franco's Spain who had used the motto 'Viva la muerte'.³

Juan Cortés and many other activists of the movement against torture have described how in their shared activity, even when violent attacks by the police occurred, this experience of their own aliveness generated strength, overcame their own and their comrades' fear and even enabled them to pity the beating policemen. It was not just a vague 'sense of community' that psychologically generated strength. The common ground for this movement was the conscious will for inclusion, for equal and equally weighted participation of all who wanted to work for the common goal of abolishing the torturous regime. The Chilean human rights movement has recognized the potential for this 'sense of community' earlier and stronger than any other anywhere else, for example when the archbishop of Santiago went into the national stadium a few days after the coup in 1973, where up to 7000 prisoners, mostly communists and socialists, were crowded together and gave a short speech:

³ More extensive information to that (and other aspects of the movement) can be found in the monography of the MCTSA, based on direct testimonies and sociological analysis, by the Chilean philosopher Hernán Vidal: *El Movimiento contra la tortura „Sebastián Acevedo". Derechos Humanos y la producción de símbolos nacionales bajo el fascismo chileno*, Edina (Minnesota) 1986.

"Perhaps many of you don't know me. My name is Raúl Silva Henríquez; I am the cardinal of the Catholic Church. The church serves all, without barriers. I am at the prisoners' disposal..."⁴

Significant inspiration for the movements was the now 95-years old Jesuit José Aldunate. Many other activists that assembled behind the big banners of MCTSA were also strongly shaped by their religious beliefs and the philosophy of non-violence. However, religion was not at the forefront since everybody willing to fight against torture was welcome. For Juan Cortés there were many reasons: "Some came because of their Christian commitments, others because of their humanist convictions and others because they had been tortured themselves." His own reasons consisted of all three of the above. He had been abducted by the police in 1979 and was brutally tortured for several long days. Not only did the inhumane treatment he had to endure unsettle him deeply, but also "the dehumanization of the torturer". Nonetheless he was certain: "The dictatorship is a colossus on fragile feet – and this fragile foot is torture."



After one of the MCTSA's campaigns we met for an extensive interview. Juan told me how the MCTSA was formed, elaborated on his motivations and also talked at great length about his own fears and how he handled them. I took the tape with me and had it transcribed later in Peru. The situation in Peru then worsened and the tape as well as the 30 page long transcript had to wait. Along with piles of other papers the interview came back to

Germany with me – until it re-emerged one day again. I read the text, reread it several times and decided it could not simply disappear again under a pile of paper.

I sent the text to a few people who were also witnesses and participants of the movement against torture in Chile back then. The Chilean social scientist Roberta

⁴ For further information about the overcoming of political borders in the Chilean and Latin American human rights movement see: Rainer Huhle: „Die politische Sprengkraft des Unpolitischen. Die Menschenrechtsbewegung verändert das politische Gesicht Lateinamerikas“, in: Jürgen Mittag/Georg Ismar (Hrsg.): „¿El pueblo unido?“ *Soziale Bewegungen und politischer Protest in der Geschichte Lateinamerikas*, Münster 2009, S. 405-432.

Bacic, who had been a member of the movement and who lives in Northern Ireland today, as well as the US American evangelical pastor Christopher Ney, committed for many years to solidarity with Chile, were inspired by Juan Cortés' moving words and wrote comments to it from their own perspectives.

For Roberta Bacic the many pictures retrieved her memory of the protests against torture, which were particularly symbolised in one special photograph: the 'arpillera' EN CHILE SE TORTURA – IN CHILE PEOPLE ARE BEING TORTURED. The picture of cloth, made by wives of murdered or disappeared people in Chile, shows a demonstration of the movement against torture. And Roberta remembered Violeta Morales, a victim of the dictatorship who transformed her pain into strength and



*arpillera „Movement Against Torture Sebastian Acevedo“
courtesy: collection Oshima Hakkō Museum, Japan
photo: Tomoko Sakai
copyright: Museum Oshima Hakkō
This arpillera was bought by the Japan Committee
in Solidarity with Chilean People, as part of their support.*



The Movement against torture in action:
Santiago 1988. Front row, second from the
left: Violeta Morales (Photo: Rainer Huhle)

also participated in the campaigns of MCTSA. On the picture she is in the first row (behind the letters JE of HOMENAJE), together with Juan Cortés (behind the letter ES of MUJERES).

Christopher Ney is mostly concerned with the religious questions that motivated Juan's stance and, connected to that, the philosophy of non-violence. The testimony of Juan Cortés demonstrates for him that God is with those that overcome their fear and jointly stand up for justice, regardless of whether they are religious or not.

Upon reading and looking at the almost 25-years old pictures that I also found on that occasion, the memory of this vulnerable, yet notwithstanding categorically determined young man, returned to me. On the picture I recognize his gaze, firmly ahead, directed at the point where any moment the 'guanacos' could appear, the water spouting steel monsters of the riot police, at least in case the timing of the

demonstration was not precise enough. I feel the tensions in his motions but also the security he must have sensed when he, as one of the few men among the victims' families, went ahead with them in one row and took part in the strength of this community that derived their force from the firm belief that the colossus had fragile feet. And I hear the name of Libertad, the invocation of freedom on the walls of the city in the song that includes all, the brave and the fearful, the silent and those who scream their fury into the world.

In the same year, 1988, the fragile feet started to crumble. In a referendum in October the majority of the Chileans did not fear the threats of Pinochet that there could be another coup. They voted for the NO, for the end of Pinochet's dictatorship, for the end of political murder, forced disappearance and torture. The next day more than a million people celebrated in the enormous Parque O'Higgins.



On October 7, 1988, the day after the plebiscite against Pinochet, more than a million Chileans celebrated in Santiago's Parque O'Higgins the victory of the NO.

Juan Cortés however, who learned to overcome his fears with the MCSA, did not want to continue living in Chile once the fight was won. He emigrated and after a few years we lost contact. Perhaps he thought his task to be done. Not lost is our shared memory of a movement that contributed greatly to a change that made it itself obsolete. In today's Chile policemen still beat, at times with utmost brutality, as a recent Report of the "Chilean Ethical Commission against Torture" shows⁵, but the country reports of the UN Committee against Torture that oversees the Convention against Torture which Pinochet signed in 1987, do not need to report of systemic torture any more.

* English translation by Rebecca Römer

⁵ *La Tortura es el miedo a las ideas de los otros. Informe de Derechos Humanos 2012 de la Comisión Ética Contra la Tortura* (online version www.contralatortura.cl), Santiago de Chile, Juni 2012.