

Stitching together nonviolence and “Movement Against Torture, Sebastián Acevedo (MCTSA)”

by Roberta Bacic, July 2012

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When accepting the challenging invitation to write about MCTSA at this time, lots of memories come flooding back. It immediately brought vividly into the present the experience of having participated in several of the actions of the Movement and also a warm feeling of fraternity, empowerment and camaraderie. The presence of Violeta Morales became palpable, in spite of the fact that she died in 2008, and it is in this context that I chose to capture and

express those feelings by illustrating this article with an arpillera that she did to denounce the use of torture.

Through the use of a piece of burlap, scraps of materials, thread, a needle, a bit of wool and a crochet hook, she left for us an account of her search, her interviews and her material knowledge of what was happening in the many torture chambers that existed during the dictatorship in my country. In conversations with her she had said that she could almost feel what her brother must have gone through and that she would fight until the end of her life to find out what had happened to him and also denounce what was happening to others who had been arrested. This material visual testimony has now been part of numerous exhibitions and allows people from different countries, cultures and political inclinations to talk about torture, something almost impossible to apprehend and talk about.



Sala de torturas/ Torture Chamber
Chilean arpillera by Violeta Morales, 1996
Courtesy Marjorie Agosin
Photo colin Peck © Roberta Bacic



Violeta Morales' photo
Courtesy of Marjorie Agosin

Violeta is also an incarnation of a nonviolent activist who used all the skills she had, plus others she developed to denounce through nonviolence her own experience with torture, the disappearance of her brother Newton Morales and the human rights violations she was becoming familiar with in her search. She participated in most of the actions of MCTSA and was also an active member of the *Association of Relatives of the Detained Disappeared* and the *Folk Music Group of the Association of the Detained Disappeared*.

The emergence of MCTSA in Chile in 1983

José Aldunate, a Jesuit priest who became the leader of the Sebastián Acevedo Movement Against Torture in Chile, says in his memoirs, "A comrade came to us and brought up the fact (of torture). We educated ourselves about torture and about the dynamics of nonviolence. We watched a film on Mahatma Gandhi. I was more motivated to protest against poverty, but I responded to the discipline of the group. We deliberated and decided to undertake a nonviolent demonstration to denounce torture... to break the barriers of silence and hiding with regards to torture, we had an obligation to denounce it in public. We needed to shake the population's conscience."¹



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

On September 14, 1983, ten years after the regime took power, the anti-torture movement was born in an action in front of the headquarters of the National Investigation Center, 1470 Borgoño St., in Santiago. Around 70 persons interrupted traffic, unfurling a banner which read "Torturing Done Here." They shouted their

¹ On http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fH8_Kp6ab48 there is a 13 minute documentary on the MCTSA where the three personalities featured here appear: Juan Cortés, el padre José Aldunate and Violeta Morales.

denunciation and sang a hymn to liberty. The group returned to this scene to denounce the regime's crimes against humanity at least once a month until 1990.

On November 11 of the same year, Sebastián Acevedo Becerra, lights fire to himself in the main square of Concepción as a way to create public awareness of the situation that his children Galo and María had been arrested by the Secret Police and he feared they would be tortured, and as an expression also of his despair. This act of immolation had such an impact in the Movement Against Torture that from then on it became Movement Against Torture Sebastián Acevedo (MCTSA). It is significant to mention that the national Commission of Truth and Reconciliation qualified his case as *Death as a consequence of political violence*. This gave a public acknowledgement of the desperate situation people lived during those years and gave his family the right to reparations. In its report it states: "he took the decision that he paid with his life in an extreme attempt to save his children from uncertain consequences, but that he could well fear were very serious, or as a desperate attempt to protest in connection to the situation that affected him as a father."

The Movement denounced torture. It left to other entities the task of investigating and making declarations. It had no meeting place, no secretariat, no infrastructure. It met in the streets and plazas when it was time to act. It had no membership list. Participants came by personal invitation, as the Movement had to avoid infiltration from the secret police and other repressive institutions. Instructions were passed from person to person. Participants were mainly trained during the actions themselves, where we evaluated each action on the spot. Most of its actions were "Blitz actions" which began quickly and then the participants tried to fade away into the crowd again, able to continue their actions on another day.

Participants faced legal and illegal sanctions when detained and prosecuted as they often were. Tear gas, beatings, detention, and prosecution were common practices used in retaliation against demonstrators. Torture was also a possible consequence of being arrested. Not only Sebastian Acevedo Movement participants faced these sanctions, also reporters and journalists willing to report on the actions and the issues that were exposed.

At some of the actions, there were as many as 300 participants. Some 500 people participated in total. There were Christians and non-Christians, priests, monks, slum dwellers, students, aged persons, homemakers, and members of various human rights movements; people of every class, ideology, and walk of life.

The main goal was to get rid of torture in Chile. The means chosen was to shake up national awareness (consciousness raising) and rouse the conscience of the nation until the regime would get rid of torture or the country would get rid of the regime. In 1988, after a widespread anti-intimidation campaign, the nonviolent "Chile Sí, Pinochet No" campaign helped, to Pinochet's shock, to defeat a plebiscite designed to ratify Pinochet's rule.

We did not realise at the time that these actions, amongst others, would put Pinochet under pressure to sign the International Convention Against Torture in 1987, which in turn would open the way to his detention in England in 1999 while awaiting the result of the request for his extradition to Spain.

Human Rights, Nonviolence to speak out truth, and resistance as a way of life

The key elements of the Movement were its commitment to Human Rights and Nonviolence. For the Movement they went hand in hand. The Movement's simple yet powerful message was that there are things happening here in this building, in this country, that they are wrong and unjust. The Government is violating the basic universally recognised principles of the rights of human beings. And it expressed that message through Nonviolence.

Nonviolence refers to a philosophy and strategy of conflict resolution, a means of fighting injustice and - in a broader sense - a way of life, developed and employed by Gandhi and his followers all around the world. Nonviolence, by this definition, is action that does not commit or allow injustice and speaks out TRUTH.

To mark International Day of Nonviolence, the Irish School of Ecumenics and INNATE sponsored a public meeting in Belfast on 1 October 2009. Tony Kempster, long an activist in the peace movement in the UK, said:

“Gandhi was one of the few men in history to fight simultaneously on moral, religious, political, social and economic fronts. His life and thought have had an enormous effect both within and outside India, and he continues to be widely revered as one of the greatest moral and political leaders of the twentieth century. He was an inspiration for the leaders of many peoples’ struggles during the 20th century and here I ask how relevant his heritage is to the world of the 21st century, facing a perfect storm of threats, many exacerbated by the actions of western nations?”

The two oldest questions in politics – ones with which he must have wrestled often - are still relevant today: to whom do we owe obligations and with whom do we feel solidarity.”

Michael Randle, born 1933 in England, is best known as a peace campaigner and peace researcher, one of the pioneers of nonviolent direct action in Britain. He has stated over the years that “governments need people more than people need governments.” And it is in this context that I would want to focus the significance and relevance of MCTSA.

Nonviolence and MCTSA today

Monday 9th of April 2012, Easter Monday in Europe, I received a press release from Villa Grimaldi, ex torture centre during Pinochet’s dictatorship. It gave an account of the Via Crucis that took place on Friday 6th of April. With renewed interest, emotion, and proximity, I read each word and looked at the images that accompanied it. Amongst other things it said: “around 1500 pilgrims from different Christian communities of Santiago, accompanied by people from very different backgrounds and motivations made today a Via Crucis which started at 10 am in Tobalaba with Arrieta (meeting point) marching towards Villa Grimaldi Peace Park where it ended The 90 year old priest, José Aldunate – founder of Movement Against Torture Sebastián Acevedo-, participated in the one kilometre walk and supported by other

people did the complete journey. . . Along the walk, there were banners demanding the end of violence against Mapuche indigenous children, end to torture in public buses and police stations and the revival of Christ in the struggles of the students”.



95 years old Jesuit priest José Aldunate, founder of the MCTSA, participated in April 2012 with other members of MCTSA in a pilgrimage to former torture center „Villa Grimaldi”, protesting against current human rights violations in Chile.

(Photo: COMUNICACIONES VILLA GRIMALDI/6/4/12, v. <http://villagrimaldi.cl/noticias/multitudinario-via-crucis-en-villa-grimaldi-recuerdo-martirio-de-daniel-zamudio-y-exigio-fin-a-la-violencia-en-territorio-mapuche/>)

Many of the people walking together and holding each other by the arms were people with whom I had participated in actions against torture in the late 1980’s. Since that day I have been in contact with some of them and feel the close energy, warmth and determination that we experienced more than 20 years ago. To talk with them and hear of the need there is in Chile of today to reorganize and prepare for action has had a strong impact in many of us. Meetings to discern the relevance of acting has confirmed in me the importance of writing about this Movement that still lives and is ready to bear witness and speak out in front of political repression.