



## 20. the truth and reconciliation commission in Chile

[Click here to open as pdf](#) [1]

Roberta Bacic was the guest speaker at a meeting of the group on 18 March 1999 at 22 Edmund Street, Bradford. Her topic was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Chile for which she had worked after the fall of the Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet. Present to hear and discuss her talk were: Christina Arber, Kathleen Arber, John Brierley, Bob Overy, Michael Randle, Carol Rank.

**Presentation** - [Roberta Bacic](#) [2]

Michael introducing Roberta said she was from Chile, had been part of a movement for social change during the Allende period, and after the coup had worked for many years with the families of the detained and disappeared. She was a staff member of War Resisters' International living in London. She would be talking about various approaches to dealing with the question of human rights.

Roberta began by saying that she preferred exchanging ideas with people to making speeches. It was difficult for her in this context and in this part of the world, to decide what part of her experience could be of interest to the group and give her the benefit of some feedback from it. She believed strongly in working in groups, not in isolation. She did not believe in writing books on your own, when you felt so happy you had written them but didn't know what happened to them or who read them. The most challenging thing was working with people and facing all the problems of having to contend with different points of view, of reaching agreements or co-existing with the differences. Earlier in the day she had spoken to MA students and would use a similar structure in her talk here but with more emphasis of what people who were activists and pacifists, and had challenged the status-quo, could do.

She would talk mainly about the final period of her work in Chile, her participation in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with all the contradictions it had for her to work for a state that had been responsible for the disappearances. It was important when working within government institutions like the Commission not to be naive and think that the state had become very good and was doing things for the benefit of the people. You had to try to understand what lay behind its actions and not to collude in helping it to continue as before. You had to act in the spaces that were open to you whilst being loyal to your own ideas.

The invitation to join the Truth and Reconciliation Commission raised many questions for her, and it had taken her six months to reply. It would mean she would earn five times more than she had ever done in her life, and that fact itself raised the first big question. Should she, in connection with human rights, get money for, and profit from, studying the suffering? And what would be her role? Those personal questions were the first ones she had to ask herself.

Then there were the more political questions. She came from an academic culture and if there had been no coup she would have been a prominent academic. She had just finished her Masters degree when the coup occurred, and was ready to start her PhD, was publishing three or four times a year and going to congresses. That was the project of life she had organised for herself - to work at an academic level for socialism and for a change of society. She belonged to a most interesting group attended by Pablo Neruda, one of its founder members, and from kindergarten to High School she had been formed to be part of the system of change. She would say that 99% of the university students at that time became involved in Allende's government. They attended extra classes, and engaged in lots of extra-curricular activities where the teachers were experimenting in new techniques and methods of education. They were in the midst of the change and involved in it.

She got her degree in 1970, just at the time that Allende took over. Although she didn't know much at that time about the political organisation of the country, she and her colleagues were involved in the work for social change. Within a period of two years you were starting to see the workers on the buses reading books, often famous books



by Dickens and others which had been translated into Spanish and published in small editions. You became so involved that you had no notion what was going on at another level, and you naively believed that the Right would allow this change to continue. It seemed so obvious that culture was growing, that people were participating, that there was no longer such an obvious division between those who used one part of the city and those who used another.

So the putsch caught her and her close group completely unawares - like a child of five. Between one day and the next, the whole world was destroyed - personal life, social life and work. It was obvious she could not go to work the day after the coup as she had been a teacher under a socialist government in a university that belonged to the government. Immediately, too, society divided. People whom you regarded as friends became your enemies. Previously you coexisted, but this was no longer possible. If you were not on the side of the generals you were immediately regarded as a communist.

So from a whole culture of change, and a culture of socialising and contributing to change, you had to start learning how to survive. Little by little you took decisions about what to do in that context. She decided to move from Santiago to a smaller town and start a new life and reorganise her whole existence, partly because her parents had taken the position of supporting the coup. She was an only child of parents who had survived the Second World War and didn't want to cause them unnecessary suffering, but on the other hand she wasn't prepared to live in that situation. The whole position in the country had changed. You had to have an identity pass to enter the university offices, with the military standing guard at the entrances. She used to go by bike and almost every day she was stopped and checked.

At the end of 1974, beginning of 1975, she made the decision to do human rights work. That meant dealing with problems of life and death. Her education had taught her to approach questions in a scientific way - reading, making index cards, working systematically. Now she was in a situation where she had to respond with action. She had not been trained for this work and learned it as she went along. She continued also working at the university, but there were lots of topics you could not touch on in dealing with students and she had to be very careful. You had to live one life and keep your work on human rights completely separate. Even her family did not know about this side of her work until eight years afterwards. She had to keep it from them in order to protect them.

Through the human rights work she got to know the people from SERPAJ (Servicio Paz y Justicia - Service for Peace and Justice) who finally brought her some years ago to Europe and to the US, and through them she made contact with War Resisters' International. She decided to focus on one side of the human rights work, namely keeping records, gathering information, and collaborating with the relatives of the disappeared and executed. So she was working with a small group within society and her view came from that world. Her task was to make a link between them and society, and for that you needed a process. You had no time to discuss politically what was good or bad. You had to restore the basic idea that it was worthwhile to go on living and that in spite of everything you were a person, not an enemy.

Over time, as the work progressed in its different stages, she and others developed a more scientific approach. They started with trying to learn from the exchange of evidence and then going into methods which could in the future have the function of keeping alive the historical memory of the people and of the process of solidarity that arose from the people. At that stage they did not expect big changes, big ideas. They were just going for a big smile, for a new way of making connections with the people and finding topics that could be common in spite of the differences and in spite of the trouble. She worked for SERPAJ, CODEPU, - another human rights organisation that was still in existence - and for the Catholic Church. In 1982 she started a big project to raise funds for young people who had been isolated from society because of being the children of the detained and disappeared so that they would have the opportunity to get into university and become professional people. There had been some projects which tended to isolate them - for instance, putting all the children of the disappeared together in special schools. But she felt that there was no other way than integrating them into society. Society, too, had a responsibility to repair what could be repaired and to include them.

She had been proposed as a worker for the Commission by three bishops, although she was not a Catholic. She had also been proposed by the Association of the Detained and Disappeared, and that was really important to her. However, it was also important to have the confidence of the bishops who had done the biggest work in keeping records during the dictatorship. Without the efforts of the Catholic Church, Chile would not have done anything about the human rights abuses. They provided places to receive the relatives and to do work in connection with mental health and keeping files.



One of the questions she asked herself on being invited to work for the Commission was why it was that some countries had a Truth Commission after war or dictatorship whilst others did not. Nothing had happened in Peru. She had done some work in Guatemala where half a million people had disappeared as against around 2,000 in Chile, yet at that stage Guatemala hadn't set up a commission. She had some theories, not proven but based on her experience. It depended partly, she thought, on the nature of the coup. In Chile, the coup had overthrown a legally established government so it was impossible not to recognize what had happened. They had imprisoned deputies and senators, and closed down organisations like the trade unions. It had also received a lot of attention worldwide, because people in many countries had been looking at this experiment of coming to socialism by elections and not by armed struggle - the first country in the world to do so.

The second thing that made it possible to have a Truth Commission in Chile was the kind of human rights abuses which were perpetrated. There were disappearances, systematic torture, and extra-judicial executions - actions considered crimes against humanity. So if they were not dealt with in the country, they would be dealt with outside it in international courts. Now, for example, we had the nice gift of Pinochet in London as a consequence of this international possibility. The creation of a Commission indicated that the country intended to solve the problem in its own way.

A third factor had to do with the kind of people who had suffered the abuses. It was not some marginal group that carried no weight in society. In the Andes, thousands of indigenous people disappeared, yet who cared? They were masses without a name. But Chile was an organised country and the people who were killed or disappeared included the president, professional people, and workers as well as indigenous people. So it was not possible to hide the continued repression. The terrible truth was that at the threshold of the 21st century there was still a difference in the way abuses of human rights were regarded according to who had suffered them.

Some people in Chile emphasised the fact that only 2,000 people had disappeared there and so it could not be compared to a war. For her it was the same political problem if one person in the country disappeared or hundreds. The fact that it was possible to disappear because of your ideas, and that state machinery had been set up to destroy the social net was the real scandal, and ideologically perverse.

A fourth factor in Chile was the existence of a strong human rights movement. She put this in the fourth place because although the energy and vitality was important, finally the decisions were taken at the political level. You could push a bit, but ultimately what counted was what the people in power decided. The human rights movement in Chile was really strong and it was formed by four or five different categories of people. There were those directly affected by the abuses - for example, the rector of the university where she studied whose two sons had disappeared and who had been dismissed from his post. People in his position provided the core of those who became engaged with the issue in various ways - through research, through denouncing the abuses inside and outside the country. There were those who joined for moral reasons, especially people from religious groups. It was not that they had been engaged in socialism or were related to 'victims', but they felt they had to do something. It was they who did social work, helped the children of the 'victims' and so on. Her best friend was a nurse and a nun who worked protecting people and drew her strength from her religion. They had worked together for 20 years and religion was never discussed. The purpose was to protect life. Then there were people who joined to oppose dictatorship. They were not going to work with the people affected by the abuses, but they were willing to resist dictatorship. They included teachers and trade unionists who started to organise NGOs and other groups. Next, there were those not willing to continue playing a marginal role in society, and who decided to join the movement because they were preparing themselves to come into government afterwards. They said, 'OK, this has to end and we want to participate. We have been for 16 years completely marginalised, and we need to have a face.' Finally there was the international network.

A fifth factor which influenced whether or not a Commission was set up was the nature of the transition after war or dictatorship. In Chile, the transition was negotiated between the military and civil society. But the military, although they lost the plebiscite, kept the power. Pinochet remained Commander in Chief and the plebiscite was held under his constitution. He had also dictated the law of impunity. So there had to be negotiations between those who had played some part in the business of government and people from the rest of society. These negotiations led to an acknowledgement that there was a need to deal with the problem of what were termed 'victims'. She did not like the term 'victims', because it gave the people no real strength, making them instead objects of pity. When she went to Palestine she was impressed by the fact that the people who died there became heroes because they had given their lives for their cause. The Commission in Chile, however, had spoken, and would always speak, of 'victims'. But it was important to recognize that some who died had resisted the military. They had been engaged in the struggle and were prepared to take the consequences of their decision. 'Victim' was not the right term for them and



they had no chance to say if they agreed with it or not. The Commission worked only on cases where people had disappeared or been executed, so the people concerned could not speak, or rebel, or complain.

Finally, on this issue she would say that a Truth Commission was likely to be established where the new government was relatively weak. They would calculate that if they had a Commission they would get support from a solid core of society and keep many of the groups on the side of the new government rather than against them. A Commission also presented a good image to the outside world.

The next big question she asked herself in considering whether or not to join the Commission was what could one achieve from the point of view of society? If she worked for the Commission and was aware of all the points she had tried to clarify, would she have a chance to make changes in the society? The Commission was not set up to make changes, but it would be working on a very important issue that was part of the history of the country. She discussed the matter with a few close personal friends whom she had worked and done research with, and concluded that there were two possibilities. You could take a reformist attitude where you said that you would have to negotiate. The violations had already happened, you would have to accept that, take a pragmatic approach and do what you could. Alternatively, you could agree to work inside the Commission but try not to forget your principles and the reasons you had worked for human rights. If you decided to work with the government, it should be for those same reasons. She then clarified with herself that she had always worked for a change in society and for social justice. So if she kept thinking of this every day and tried to resist becoming polluted with the forces that were working in favour of a very open pragmatism, she might make a worthwhile contribution. Everything she did should give something of justice to the people who had suffered.

From a personal point of view she had to ask herself what she could do as an individual. Could she be part of this new transition that was called 'transition to democracy', and just vote? That would mean that the people who came into power would make the decisions. Should she just say that what happened was awful, that she didn't like the new system which was so pragmatic, and would just live her life and earn her living doing translations? Or should she look for a place where she could still do something, in spite of the conditions and in spite of the nature of the new government which was very similar to the one it replaced? There were fewer human rights abuses under the new government, but there was still a society which did not consider social change. She decided that as she had worked with the victims she would have to join the Commission but taking a clear position on the side of the people who had suffered abuses. As the Association of the Detained and Disappeared had proposed her to work with the Commission, she had to make sure that she defended their position, even though sometimes their demands were very radical.

The last question she raised with herself was whom did the Commission serve? Was it really the victims? Would they get compensation? It was the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. Who was the owner of the Truth, if there was any? And who could order Reconciliation? Was that something you could bring about by decree? Since the victims were the first preoccupation of her work, she would try to get the best possible compensation, though she knew that they would also have to do networking to activate the agencies for change within society. They should not think that the Commission on its own would be enough, and should realise that other parts of the society would have to take over.

What she had not fully realised at the time was that the two agencies which would benefit most from the work of the Commission were the new government and the military. The new government because it gave an impression of dealing with the problem and so reduced the level of protest. The military, because the Commission was not a tribunal, and so no one faced trial and punishment. The Commission could only request people to give a testimonial; they could not require them to do so. Moreover the rules governing the conduct of the Commission meant it was not allowed to make public the evidence it heard from individuals. So while the Commission was in being, that information was kept within the institution. The military, too, had organised the whole country and controlled the means of communication. Clearly then it was not a Commission that was independent. It was completely controlled by the military, even though they were not present.

In spite of everything she finally went to the Commission and worked with it for the five years of its existence. There were two clear stages to the work. The first began when the newly elected president, Patricio Aylwin, created the National Commission of Truth and Reconciliation on 25 April 1990 by a supreme decree. He was a lawyer who had dealt with human rights problems and personally organised the Commission. However, he looked for people who had a lot of prestige but did not belong to the culture of human rights victims. The human rights groups would have been severely criticised for being too radical and having their own interests. A group of nine people had the mission of collecting all the evidence from the records of the Church and NGOs working on human rights, and of producing





a report on the most relevant human rights abuses perpetrated in the country in relation to the detained, disappeared and executed. They were given only nine months to complete this task, an extremely short period for the work involved in a country 4,200 km long. They had to constitute themselves all over the country, and they decided to hire people who had not been part of the human rights groups. The idea was that the Commission should be neutral, not positioned in favour of human rights. However, the experience was so terrible for them that most of them crashed after two or three months because they could not stand taking testimonials. They had never previously been faced with having to hear what had happened next to them without their realising it. To take the testimonial of someone who had survived required a lot of guts, but also some experience. You could not say to someone who had survived torture, 'Do you swear to tell the truth? What is the reason that brings you here?' There were lots of techniques you had to learn. She herself knew the methodology of taking a testimonial, but she didn't know how to deal with the human processes.

At the end of its work, the group published a report in three volumes entitled This is the Truth of Chile. It was well written, and represented an incredible achievement after only nine months. It played an important role in giving back some dignity to the those making the testimonials by this public acknowledgement that they had been speaking the truth. But of course it was not the Truth, but part of the historical memory that was being preserved. It would take a much longer period to reveal anything like the full truth. The Commission tried to give an analysis of the causes of the coup, distinguished different periods of the dictatorship according to the kinds of repression that was being perpetrated, and finally, in the third volume, listed the names of all the victims, giving in each case a short description of the person and of the circumstances in which they had disappeared or been executed.

This was the first important achievement of the Commission. It also proposed, that the government should create a special body to deal with reparation and the problem of finding the bodies of the disappeared. That task was given to a Corporation which would also be charged with dealing with pensions for the relatives of the detained and disappeared. The law on compensation was quite advanced for a traditional Catholic country like Chile in that it covered the real family in cases where people were not married - partners, not just husbands and wives. However, the country never studied the differences between the peoples of Chile or what the process implied for the indigenous population. Was there or not a difference in the kind of reparations you needed in relation to them? The idea was to treat everybody equally, but no account was taken of people's differing needs. So for instance a bit of money was little help to indigenous people whose land had been taken from them. The problem needed to be dealt with in terms of their culture. In the indigenous society, when someone in the family disappeared, the assumption was that this was because they had acted in contradiction to the cultural norms. They had gone into the state and had adopted politics that were not in accordance with the culture. They were punished for that, and now the state was giving them money which created another problem as these people were used to sharing whatever they had.

This part of the work lasted several years and ended without anything being really completed. Most of the bodies were not found, and the wording was changed so that it spoke of locating the 'final destiny of the disappeared. since they knew that in most cases the remains had been thrown into the sea. You could tell the family what had happened to the person, but that didn't finish the matter. However, the Commission did publish at the end of 1996 a final, challenging book in which they proposed a system of incorporating human rights into the curriculum of students to create a culture of human rights rather than dealing only with the abuses. So there were some things they were able to do. But still there were many things left unresolved. Most importantly, there was no justice.

As activists, or professionals, they had to constantly question themselves about their goals. However, they needed not only a philosophy, but also a notion of how these goals could be furthered in practice. A group which didn't challenge the injustices that existed would remain isolated. The problem was how to manage the tension between keeping true to themselves and challenging an unjust situation.

Roberta concluded the presentation by showing several albums of photographs taken over the years in Chile. It was difficult, she said, to share an experience without a sense of the actual people behind it. She had classified the albums according to four main things they had to do in the human rights work. The first of these tasks was working directly with the families of those who had suffered. However, there were only a few photos dating back to the period of the dictatorship because it had been too dangerous to keep such photos at that time. She did not even have photos of her own family prior to 1988, and these few photos from the period were mainly taken by foreign visitors who were part of the international network. The album also contained photos Roberta had taken in 1990 when they had built a memorial for a group of detained and disappeared who had been thrown into a river. This was the first social event in which the killings were publicly recognized - and such monuments and symbols were very important. Finally in this album there were photos Roberta had taken in December 1997 when she visited all the families she had worked with down the years.



Another part of the work was acting alongside the families by taking part in their actions and protests. So the second album had photos of protests against impunity, of a burial after finding the bones of some people who had been killed, of actions in front of churches and so forth. The third area related to workshops, both those they organised and those that were put on for them. Their purpose was to teach people techniques, exchange experiences and get some spiritual input. There were pictures of groups in Europe and in Chile working with people and training them. In 1982 she had worked in London with the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) doing training in nonviolence and working with Adolpho Perez Esquivel, the Nobel Prizewinner. The fourth area of work was keeping records. The photos related to this work showed the kind of places you visited so you could have a sense of what had happened and the context in which it occurred.

### ***NARP Discussion***

#### *How effective was the Commission?*

Christina said that it sounded from Roberta's description that the Commission was all subtly managed off-stage by the military. However, there was the notion in circumstances like these that if you were one of the families concerned, simply hearing what had happened to your loved one resolved something and allowed you to move on. Did that really happen? Was there any net benefit? If there was any benefit to individuals, was it outweighed by the fact that there was no legal justice? In South Africa, there did seem to be instances where some individuals at least benefited when the truth was brought out into the open, and when, in some instances, the perpetrator and victim met face to face.

Roberta said the Truth Commission in South Africa was modelled on the one in Chile, but the cultural background was different and it was this which affected what a nation needed to do to go forward. In Chile she knew of no example of perpetrator and victim coming together. However, there were some positive outcomes. For some people, for example, the building of a monument had been healing, and even if it was good for only one person it was worth doing. The compensation too could be important. It had been wonderful for some people after being poor for 17 years to receive a monthly income. Even the fact of going to an office and being addressed properly as Mr or Mrs restored to them some measure of dignity. Nevertheless, a society that gave the task of discovering the truth to a commission but didn't work actively to get people to confront it, was evading its responsibility. There was no discussion in Chile of how it came about that part of the society refused to believe for 17 years that people were disappearing, despite the protests in the streets.

In general, the revelations of the Commission had ambiguous consequences. She recalled the case of a woman who waited 16 years for her son to come back, keeping the door open, ironing his clothes, and being sure he would return. She had been present when the police detained him and they had told her that they just wanted to ask him some questions and that he would be back very soon. Then in 1991, one year after the change of government she came to Roberta in a highly distressed state and said she had been a bad mother and very selfish. She had seen a programme on television about torture, and she realised that in wanting her son to come back she had been wishing him a life in which he would have suffered torture. A good mother would have wanted him to have died immediately. However, for other women, watching that programme had a good effect. In those kind of situations there was no general pattern..

There were important differences too in the response of the Commission's work between the indigenous population and other Chileans. This became clear later when she and some of her close colleagues carried out a major study of the effects of political repression on society. They had supposed that the discovery of the remains of people who had been killed would be a positive step for relatives and friends and that they would experience some relief, and feel that this was the end of the matter. But what they found instead was that for many indigenous people, discovering the remains, far from being a relief, was a real torture. In their culture, after five years they could accept the mourning process; finding the remains brought everything back.

For other people who were engaged in movements, finding the remains was basic. It was basic in the intellectual process, although when they had to go to court to give testimonials they sometimes found it almost impossible to do so. They had organised their lives in connection with looking for the remains, for demanding that action should be taken to bring this about, and then suddenly one day the remains were found. It was a terrible experience, too, because the process of identifying the remains was done by holding interviews with the relatives and getting them



to describe the people when they were alive

### *Ambiguities of Reconciliation*

Roberta said that for her reconciliation in relation to the Commission's work was highly suspect. It was being promoted by the people in power who asked for, and demanded, reconciliation from those who suffered. For Chileans, reconciliation represented a spiritual state. How could a Commission give both Truth and Reconciliation? These were things on two different levels. Rather than talking about reconciliation she preferred to speak about the different ways in which people came to deal with the past. Some people had accepted that the killing had happened but still wanted to know who did it. Just to know that there was a human being responsible made a difference because their husband, their wife, their child was a human being attacked by another human being. The fact that the perpetrator finally had a name made a difference, even if there was no chance they would say sorry for what they had done. From a religious point of view, reconciliation needed the acknowledgement of the crime and recognition that it was wrong. That had not happened in Chilean society.

Nevertheless, there were some interesting points about the Commission which she would like to study in depth with others. For instance during the last two years of its work it was able to include in the list of people liable for compensation the families of some people who had committed suicide. This was an important recognition that the extent of suffering and terror led some people to lose all hope and take their own life. So the Commission did achieve certain things and she did not deny the validity and seriousness of its work, and of the way the research and the hunt for evidence was carried out. She herself had never before had such an extensive access to different elements of society because she interviewed people from murderers in prison to bishops. Some of these murderers were related to the disappeared, or had participated in some way in the repression, and had taken to crime as a means of survival.

The work also gave her and the others on the Commission an insight into the minds of the torturers. The experience of hearing all the horror stories for years on end was so traumatic and many commissioners had to undergo counselling. In one of these sessions a colleague, an important and well-known psychiatrist, said that the torturers could be normal, healthy people. They could be good husbands, loving parents, people who enjoyed going out for a picnic. That was a big shock for those who had suffered because they needed to think that the torturers were monsters. In fact the torturers were trained to see their opponents as monsters, as people who were going to attack the country. So the fact that you had to come to understand society and find some method of coexistence was really important. She had found the books of Primo Levi very helpful in this regard - when he spoke of 'the saved' and 'the drowned'. You survived while you were suffering most, using your instinct to survive. But when you did survive you asked yourself why you had done so and not the others. You felt guilty about the things you did and didn't do. You asked yourself the question, 'If he disappeared, wasn't I good enough to disappear? It means that I wasn't seen as a real threat.' The question of social and mental health after the experience of dictatorship was a crucial issue.

Another important thing she got from the work was a glimpse of the panic felt by the military in face of those like herself who opposed them. The military regarded them as enemies, not just because they disliked them but because they feared them. She and the others had always thought that the military were extremely powerful and had no fears, but through her work she gained an insight into their mentality. Today most of the relatives of the detained and disappeared in the small towns lived one or two blocs away from the perpetrators. They went to the same church, took communion together and their children attended the same school.

Kathleen asked about the fact that the people who had suffered from the repression and the perpetrators might live within two blocs of one another. Did they just ignore each other? Were the kids who attended the same school aware of what had happened? Roberta said it was bizarre. When she had lost her job at the university in 1982 she had gone to work at a High School teaching philosophy. She was dealing with 17- and 18-year-old students in their last year at High School, and found that one of them was the son of a governor who was in the military and another was the son of a disappeared. But in the classroom the topic was not raised and the discussion was about the economic situation.

### *Absence of Justice*



Carol asked if it had been understood from the beginning that no individuals would be held accountable in law. Roberta confirmed that in general this was the case though some few perpetrators did come to court but without facing the risk of punishment. The only people who did go to jail were those who were tried in Chile under pressure from the US State Department for crimes committed in the US against US citizens. The frustrating thing for the Commission was that in some of the cases it was fairly obvious who was responsible, but still no names could be mentioned. The Commission was not a tribunal and was not making any accusations. It spoke of what happened to the people who disappeared, but not about the people who made them disappear.

Roberta then related an experience which illustrated the frustration and incomprehension many felt at the absence of justice. She was working with the Commission at the time and taking a testimonial from a policeman when there was a knock on the door and in walked an indigenous woman from a region where people had disappeared. She took one look at the man, and angrily walked off, slamming the door behind her. Roberta went to visit her some weeks later when the woman explained that the policeman was the one who had taken her brother. Did Roberta want information from her or from him? So she had to explain that it was necessary to hear both testimonies. The woman's own evidence did in fact help them to understand some aspects of the problem with regards to the indigenous community so that when money came through, they could talk to the judge of that community and look for the best ways of distributing it, taking account of indigenous law.

Michael asked whether a compromise with the military was a political necessity for the society to move forward to a more democratic system. If every perpetrator faced trial and possibly imprisonment, including Pinochet himself, would not the military have resisted right to the end and perhaps made any kind of reasonably peaceful transition impossible? Roberta said she was sure that if the military had felt there was no way out for them they would have resisted by force. Their immunity from prosecution was part of the deal.

Michael also asked if justice in this situation meant the perpetrators being imprisoned or receiving some other form of punishment. Roberta said that for some people having the policeman appear at the Commission and acknowledge what had happened was important. Others wanted those responsible to be sent to prison. One of her good friends who is a psychiatrist was terribly tortured, couldn't have children as a consequence and lived in exile for many years. When she returned to Chile she worked with the victims of the repression, and then one day had to give evidence at a trial. She came back completely confident because she had faced the man who had tortured her. She was well dressed, presented as a psychiatrist, and she had seen him dirty and in a bad physical condition. She knew he was lying, and he knew that she knew he was lying. The fact that she saw him there in the tribunal was enough for her. But she was a person who had developed all those skills of dealing with the past and who had worked with others who had suffered. A simple person, unable to do these acrobatics of accommodation, would react very differently. She would say that if her husband stole a chicken he would go to jail, yet the policeman who killed her son did not go to jail. She was driven mad because she could not understand how this could happen. And how could you explain it to her? What she said was completely true. Roberta would never try to convince her she was wrong.

Finally, Roberta said it was her frustration at the lack of movement in the society that led to her decision to leave the country. She had always hoped that the Commission's work in relation to building a culture of human rights would set something in motion and bring about lasting change. She was not referring here to resisting the military, but to rebuilding the networks and at least recognizing the need to deal differently with indigenous people. That would have been an indication that society was taking the issue of human rights seriously. She had hoped too that a young generation of students at the universities would be motivated to take an active part in building a fairer society. Instead they were quite reactionary. They grew up in a society where money and status were important, and the revelation of the truth of what had occurred did not mean so much to them. It was far away from their own reality, and many of their parents did not want to tell the children what had gone on.

[Click here to open as pdf](#) [1]

[Return to 'challenge to nonviolence' table of contents](#) [3]





Attachment:  [20-truth.pdf](#) [1]

**Source URL (modified on 13/08/2014 - 11:07):** <http://civilresistance.info/challenge/truth>

#### Links

[1] <http://civilresistance.info/sites/default/files/20-truth.pdf>

[2] <http://civilresistance.info/challenge/preface#Roberta>

[3] <http://civilresistance.info/challenge>