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Feminist Memory & Dictatorship Chile

"Love and solidarity between women was key to survival"



Acción por la memoria de la comuna de Macul, en la ciudad de Santiago de Chile. / Foto: Bernat Marrè

Sources: <https://www.pikaramagazine.com>

Alejandra Holzapfel and Haydee Oberreuter, survivors of torture during the Chilean dictatorship, are two of the faces of the work to make visible violence against women, especially sexual violence and forced abortion as a specific type of torture.

In the commune of Macul in the city of Santiago de Chile, on the corner of Iran Street and Los Plátanos, is one of the 1,168 detention and torture spaces used during the civic-

military dictatorship of **Augusto Pinochet**. Popularly known as La Discotéque, due to the high volume of the music that covered the screams of the detainees, or La Venda Sexy, due to the sexual nature of the tortures, it was not until last September 1 that, after the permanent struggle of survivors and human rights organizations, the State recovered the building to convert it into the Iran 3037 Site of Memory.

Alejandra Holzapfel is the president of the Iran 3037 Association of Memory and Human Rights, an entity that has worked tirelessly to resignify the place and turn it into a space for reparation, justice and never again. A survivor of torture, Holzapfel tells his story to the groups of people who regularly gather in the park in front of the building, which has become a forest of memory. From its trees hang the photographs of the 33 comrades detained and disappeared in this active center between 1974 and 1977.

The commemorative events of the 50th anniversary of the coup d'état have helped civil society entities to persist in the need to do justice and work on memory, despite the denialist voices that continue to stultify the narrative about violence during the dictatorship. These entities do not forget, for example, the statements of the far-right deputy **Gloria Naveillán**, who on August 23 said that sexual violence against women during the dictatorship was "part of the urban legend."

In 2014, Holzapfel, along with a group of former political prisoners, filed a lawsuit against the state focused on **the recognition of sexual violence as a specific type of torture**. The aim was to differentiate sexual violence from the generalized definition of torture. **"We need to emphasize the gendered nature of the repression of women, the tortures that were generally different from those of male prisoners, even though many of them also suffered political and sexual violence. We are faced with denialist statements that try to make this type of practice invisible, some of which are present to this day,"** he says.



Alejandra Holzapfel in front of the former clandestine center of kidnapping, torture and extermination Venda Sexy. / Photo: Marta Saiz

For Holzapfel, the historic ruling of this lawsuit – which the Supreme Court ratified on August 21, 2023 – implies the recognition of the widespread practices of political-sexual violence during the dictatorship and the sentences to 15 years in prison of the torturers **Raúl Iturriaga Neumann, Manuel Rivas Díaz and Hugo Hernández Valle**. "With this jurisprudence we are protecting the new generations of girls and young women who have been sexually violated by the repressive apparatuses of the Chilean State in student, feminist or dignity marches."

The [report of the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture of 2003–Valech I Commission](#) – received testimony from 3,399 women. Almost all of them, regardless of age, reported having suffered sexual violence and 316 reported having been raped. However, the report also estimates that the number of women sexually abused is much higher than the cases reflected in the document.

Holzapfel was 19 years old when she was detained by the National Intelligence Directorate (DINA), the dictatorship's secret police. It was December 1974. She was a second-year veterinary school student and was a member of the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR). In the early hours of the morning, some men came to look for her at her home on the same night that **Beatriz Bataszew**, a fellow militant, asked her to take refuge there. "The *military* told my mother to have breakfast ready for me. That I'd be back at 7 a.m.," he recalls.

The men put her in a van and blindfolded her. She tried to count the blocks, but lost count. She was first taken to Villa Grimaldi, where she became number 617. "That's when you stopped being a person." They stripped her naked and searched every part of her body for any documents. "They were looking to completely degrade you as a human being." He was there for five days.

In front of the groups of visitors to Iran 3037, the activist always omits the details of the tortures; "That side hurts me. You know everything that happened." **For her, the important thing is what came next, when she returned from the interrogation room: "Love and solidarity between women was the key to survival. It was so important to love each other, that our companions received us with love and affection... With all those women, to this day, we are like sisters."** After Villa Grimaldi, she was transferred to Iran 3037, where she was reunited with Bataszew, who was arrested three days after her. In that place, in addition to several torture rooms, there was a basement where

prisoners were sexually abused by a dog trained for this purpose. The animal was named Volodya, satirizing the communist senator **Volodya Teitelboim**, who was in exile in Moscow. "From that moment until today I can't have contact with animals. And it hurts me terribly because it changed my life, it turned my whole life project around," she explains.



Remembrance action in what will be the Site of Memory. / Photo: Bernat Marrè

From her time in Iran 3037, where she estimates she spent about 11 days, Holzapfel also highlights that solidarity and love between colleagues. **Because they knew that torturers wouldn't approach a woman if she had her period, when one of them had her period, she would leave blood-stained papers in the bathroom for the others to put on.** "We women were told that our role was to wash, cook and take care of our husbands, not to be in the street. And that's why we deserved all that punishment. We were just young people who wanted a better world," she stresses.

Holzapfel was betrayed by her political education teacher and member of the central committee of the MIR, who after suffering continuous torture began to collaborate. "I was on the other side defending him and it was tremendously disappointing, because I idealized him. It took me many years to understand why he had collaborated in that way and I, who was *just* a militant, was being careful with my comrades," she says. The activist still remembers one of the phrases she used to respond to her torturers when they asked her for information: "Even if there is one compañera left, we will be thousands again."

Haydee and the Flying Fish

Haydee Oberreuter says that she reached adolescence in a country where being part of political organizations was something very natural. Originally from Valparaíso, she

entered the university to study History in 1972, where she arrived as a leader, an heiress of her time. "We were people who wanted to be an active and committed part of the Popular Unity process and the changes that were taking place," she says.

Her work as an opponent in the Unitary Popular Action Movement (MAPU) placed her in the crosshairs of the dictatorship. In 1975, in order to force his surrender – he carried out his activity clandestinely – the military kidnapped his mother and his one-year-old daughter. At the Almirante Silva Palma barracks in Valparaíso, **ten men tortured her with the intention of causing her to lose the four-month-old son she was expecting.** They shouted that they were doing it for the good of the country. "They turned Sebastian into a terrorist before he came into the world."

"They didn't even punish you for being yourself; They did it so that your partner would suffer, because they were insulting something that, supposedly, belonged to him. For **the military, women were mere collateral damage of the political activity of our comrades. It was an aggression with a more aggravating connotation, of discrimination and invisibility.**" As she explains, the torture she suffered was especially brutal because of her condition as a woman "alienated" from the roles associated with women of the time: "We were also punished for being pregnant and doing politics."



Haydee Oberreuter poses for the photograph. / Photo: Bernat Marrè

It took more than two decades for Haydee Oberreuter to tell her story publicly: "It hurt me that, as the torturers themselves said, whoever saw me knew that they had cut me open from chest to pubis." The first interview in which he spoke on the subject was given to journalist **Alejandra Matus** and was published in December 2004 in the magazine *Plan B*. That copy caught the attention of lawyer **Vicente Bárzana** who, without knowing the

activist, drafted and filed a complaint with the courts for crimes against humanity committed against Oberreuter. Ten years after that complaint, the Court of Appeals accepted it and appointed a judge to investigate it. Finally, in 2016, four former Navy agents – **Manuel Atilio Leiva, Juan de Dios Reyes, Juan Orlando Jorquera** and **Valentín Evaristo Riquelme** – were convicted of being responsible for Sebastián's torture and death.

In the court hearings, the activist had to deal with the arguments of the defense, which appealed to the age of the defendants to avoid their imprisonment: "The same infamous being who opened me from top to bottom is sunbathing in Villa Alemania without having paid a single day in jail. None of the three who are left alive did."

The sentence was a historic ruling as it was one of the first cases involving crimes of the dictatorship to be convicted. However, **forced abortion under torture is not a crime in Chile and that is one of the struggles that Oberreuter is still waging.** Constantly urged to turn the page, today she is one of the most powerful voices in civil society in the defense of the families of disappeared persons and victims of State terrorism between 1973 and 1990. She was Undersecretary of Human Rights in 2022 and part of 2023, and is currently an advisor to the National Institute of Human Rights. Her testimony was also collected by director **Pachi Bustos** in the documentary *Haydee and the Flying Fish*.

"I hope that during this year we will be able to take the issue of forced abortion as a crime against humanity to court. Together with two other comrades, with whom I was detained in Tres Álamos, we want to open the debate with the far right. Why not criminalize it if they maintain that the girl exists from the moment of conception? In their own words, they killed one person. That's why it's hard for them to fight me," he explains. The human rights defender states that forced abortion needs to be criminalized in order to generate guarantees of non-repetition. The Valech I Report notes that, of the women who gave their testimony, 229 were arrested while pregnant and 11 of them suffered sexual violence. In addition, due to the torture they suffered, 20 had abortions and 15 had their daughters in prison.

A few years after suffering the forced abortion and torture, Oberreuter became pregnant again. Against all odds, that baby did survive. "Not only was it born, but it contributed with its growth inside my belly to distend the muscles, the skin... He put in its place everything that wouldn't let me straighten out. He came to heal me," she shares.

In 2016, after the Court's ruling, Oberreuter decided to symbolically release Sebastian from the barracks where he had stayed 40 years earlier. Under the figure of a flying fish. To release it into the sky and the sea. "Being light, not pain." He gathered the people closest to him in a ceremony in the middle of the sea in Valparaiso, where they threw paper flying fish to begin, at last, a process of mourning and reparation.

"I wanted Sebastian to be able to fly when they wanted to catch him under the sea and to swim when they wanted to catch him in the air. To give him the possibility of always being saved."

Source: <https://www.pikaramagazine.com/2023/12/el-amor-y-la-solidaridad-entre-mujeres-fue-clave-para-sobrevivir/>

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