

# Tracing Reconciliation: Chilean Truth Commissions and Memorial Sites

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*The Military Dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) managed to leave its seat of power with a solid supporters base in Chilean society. Under the new democratic government the 1991 National Truth and Reconciliation Commission is created, focussing on the detained disappeared and those who died, in an attempt to align Chilean collective memory. This produces a 'thin' collective memory that does not go uncontested. Human rights organisations and survivors manage to remain in a position were they can keep on pressing for truth, justice and reparation, gaining momentum as Pinochet is detained in London in 1998. The 2003 National Commission on Political Prison and Torture, which officially recognised the survivors of detention and torture, is part of this contestation and negotiation process which goes on until this very day. These processes are connected to and can be traced on the local level where the creation of a memorial site on the grounds of a former detention and torture centre, Villa Grimaldi, leads to fierce debates on what should be remembered and how it should be remembered. By analysing the links between the production of collective memory on the national and local level, I show how Chilean collective memory on the Military Regime has grown 'thicker', has become more shared which can be understood as a process of reconciliation, and the necessity of local anthropological research in the understanding of intricate processes such as reconciliation.*

In my search for how memory works in Chile, people never tire of telling me that until this very day there is a strong division between Chileans on what happened on the 11 of September 1973 when the Chilean Armed Forces moved against President Salvador Allende, on what happened during the Military Regime under Pinochet, and how to asses it's causes and consequences.<sup>2</sup> No truth commission, no judicial prosecution, no 'mea culpa', no memorial will ever change that, they assure me. However, over the last 30 years, through the ongoing process of contestation and negotiation, Chileans have managed to create more common ground for collective memory of the 1973-1990 Military Regime than these voices would lead to believe.

In this essay I will argue that reconciliation is a process that may be traced by looking at the production of collective memory. Through contestation and negotiation on both the national and the local level, collective memory in Chile has grown 'thicker', has become more shared.<sup>3</sup> This can be

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<sup>2</sup> For a concise history and analysis of the Military Regime 1973-1990 in Chile in the English language, see Ensalaco 2000.

<sup>3</sup> There is an extensive literature on memory. I consider as important theoretical approaches that memories are plural and that memory making is a relational process. It is something that takes place between people and groups, and inherently bears an element of conflict in it. Collective memory is under constant construction and

understood as a process of reconciliation. The developments on the national level such as the creation of the 1991 National Truth and Reconciliation Commission generate the opening up of a space where collective memory can be contested and negotiated, leading to an increase in possible shared perspectives on the past. The 2003 National Commission on Political Prison and Torture is part of this contestation and negotiation process, and in itself generates new spaces for contestation and negotiations. These processes are connected to and can be traced on the local level where the creation of a memorial site on the grounds of a former detention and torture centre, Villa Grimaldi, leads to fierce debates on what should be remembered and how it should be remembered. By analysing the links between the production of collective memory on the national and local level I want to show how Chilean collective memory on the Military Regime has grown ‘thicker’ and the necessity of local anthropological research in the understanding of intricate processes such as reconciliation.

### **A Story of Two Men**

Rafaël G. and Héctor L.<sup>4</sup> both studied at the University of Chile and were both members of the MIR (Movimiento Izquierda Revolucionaria) a left wing political movement. Both were detained by men belonging to the secret service DINA (Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional) in their houses in the presence of their families in the month of October 1974. Both were handcuffed and blindfolded, thrown into the back of a car and brought to Cuartel Terra Nova, better known as ‘Villa Grimaldi.’ Once a beautiful estate on the outskirts of Santiago it was converted into a base for the secret service adding a wooden cell block right next to the old mansion, and using the old water tower for torture and isolation.

Rafaël was tortured with electricity and hurt and humiliated in many ways: the foul smell of the cells where many were locked together, the screams of those who were being tortured, the humiliation of the horrible food, the absence of hygiene, the constant abuse. He relates the reluctance and the fears of the prisoners amongst each other; the fear of being betrayed, the fear to betray. He mentions examples of solidarity which, he insists, saved his life. He only once saw Héctor, severely injured. Rafaël was trapped in the clandestine circuit of detention and torture centres created by the Secret Service for almost eight months. Then he was brought to an officially recognised detention centre. After another ten months in prison they let him go. Héctor was last seen in October 1974 in Villa Grimaldi.

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reconstruction, which will never finish (Robben 2005: 15). It can be seen as an attempt of people to debate, trying to create common ground, negotiating the situation in the present (Lambek 1996: 239). By looking at the *production* of collective memory the focus is on the source of what is happening: what are the historical circumstances, which groups, can enforce what is to be remembered, and how is it to be remembered, what are the negotiations, discussions, silences and debates. For an interesting critique of the ‘Memory Boom’ in anthropology, see Berliner 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Rafaël and Héctor are fictitious persons. This short paragraph serves as an illustration of the experiences lived by survivors of detention and torture and is based on conversations with different persons in the field.

This lived experience of those who were detained, tortured and disappeared, and those who were detained, tortured and, in many cases after prolonged imprisonment, liberated, has only gradually found its way into the collective memory of the Chileans over the last thirty years. The 1991 National Truth and Reconciliation Commission only looked at cases of detained disappeared, including Héctor, leaving Rafaël to the margins of that official history. It was not until 2003 when the National Commission on Political Detention and Torture finished its work, that Rafaël's experience was made officially known to the Chileans by the publishing of its report. A similar process takes place at the local level: in the nineties the grounds of Villa Grimaldi on which the torture centre had operated was converted into a Peace Park featuring beautiful gardens and little explicit reference to what had happened there except for a wall with names, including Héctor's'. Around 2003 parts of the torture centre were reconstructed. Today you can enter a replica of a cell that once held Rafaël for days.

### **Truth and Reconciliation: the detained disappeared**

In April 1990 the newly chosen President Patricio Aylwin emits a decree which creates the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission, also known as the Commission Rettig.<sup>5</sup> The goal of the Commission was to reach consensus on what had happened during the dictatorship, establishing a truth that would open up the way to national reconciliation. In order to reach that goal the Commission had to establish a sort of minimal basis which could be agreed upon. It looked only into 'the most severe human rights violations,' and considered individual victims on 'both sides.'

The Rettig Report describes the development of the repressive tactics of the regime, reconstructing the modus operandi of the secret services.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the chronological description the individual cases are presented. Rafaël testified before the Commission as a witness of torture, murder and disappearances. Héctor's case is one paragraph, it describes that he was arrested in his house, that according to witnesses he was last seen in Villa Grimaldi and that therefore 'the Commission is convinced that his disappearance was the work of state agents, who in doing so violated his human rights'. The last volume of the Rettig Report lists all cases alphabetically. In total 2298 victims are named, 979 of them are classified as detained disappeared. The perpetrators are not named; they remain nameless and faceless. A reparation law followed the Rettig Report. Since 1993 Héctor's parents receive a life long pension.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación was created on 25 April 1990 by Supreme Decree 335. On 4 March 1991 President Aylwin presents the findings of the Commission laid down in the three volumes of the Rettig Report to the Chilean public on national TV.

<sup>6</sup> The Report dedicates two pages to Cuartel Terranova or Villa Grimaldi where Héctor and Rafaël were held. It describes its function as detention and torture centre between 1974 and 1977 and details some of the places where prisoners were held such as the closet like cells and the water tower in which small isolation cells were built. It also mentions forms of torture such as torture with electricity, torture through hanging and torture with water. (CNVR 1991: 465-467).

<sup>7</sup> Ley de Reparación 19.123, created on 8 February 1992. Since then a reparation program has continued under various laws and names. In 2009 this program functions under the Human Rights Program focussing primarily

The Commission aimed for consensus but the report is highly contested. Not only by the Armed Forces who in unmistakable terms deny and disqualify its contents,<sup>8</sup> but also by family members who want to know: ‘Where are they?’ and human rights organisations who want justice done. It will be the insistence of individuals and groups that keeps the memory of the detained disappeared alive in countless acts, meetings, commemorations and memory tokens, until with the detention of Pinochet in 1998 the contestation and negotiation of collective memory intensifies beyond what was imaginable in the early nineties.

The processes at play on the national level, where the Rettig Report opened up a space to contest and negotiate collective memory on what had happened during the dictatorship, can also be found on the local level, on the site where Héctor and Rafaël were held: Villa Grimaldi.

### **Peace Park Villa Grimaldi**

In September 1987 the former director of the Secret Service sells the premises of former detention and torture centre Villa Grimaldi to a private company and destroys all constructions on the site. Local social organisations call for action and try to recuperate the grounds for the neighbourhood. The government intervenes and the grounds remain untouched for a long time. In 1992 a young architecture student of the conservative Catholic University has decided to write her thesis on symbolic architecture. She has been a member of an organisation with a religious signature that denounced torture during the dictatorship and remembers Villa Grimaldi. She visits the bare grounds and starts looking for survivors. This is how she meets Rafaël. She told me, how he told her about the horrors but also about the sounds of the garden and the neighbourhood around Villa Grimaldi, the birds, and the bells of a nearby cloister. He also talked about the smell of the roses that grew on the grounds. It inspired her to remake this place of horror into a place of peace and reflection, a Peace Park. Its original design features green gardens marked by a cross laid out on the grounds. The giant “X” marks the earth as if to say: ‘Here people were tortured.’ It also represents the “X” of *nunca más*, never again. The central piece of the Peace Park is a water fountain, a mosaic made of the rubble of the old mansion that once stood on the grounds. The water washes the place clean from suffering and sorrow, symbolising a catharsis.

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on support of the family members, the court cases and (symbolic) reparation. Its final goal is unchanged throughout the years: finding the bodies of the detained disappeared. For an extensive analysis the Reparation laws in Chile, see Lira and Loveman 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Pinochet as Commander in Chief of the Military presents the report of the Military before el Consejo de Seguridad Nacional on the 27 March 1991. He disqualifies the report as administrative, political, not objective, violating its explicit judicial limits and inciting violence and hostility thereby acting ‘completely opposite to the conciliatory proposals expressed by the President’. (CEP 1991: 450)



Photo 1,  
Children  
playing in the  
Central  
Fountain of  
Peace Park –  
Villa Grimaldi  
(temporarily out  
of water).

23 September  
2007, photo by  
the author.

The architect and the local organisations join forces and around 1994 manage to obtain the (financial) support of the government for both the recuperation of the grounds and the creation of the Peace Park. They decide to hold open meetings about the exact contents of the Park. There is a growing group of former prisoners who would want to see Cuartel Terranova completely reconstructed to show to the public what happened there. Their voices are overruled by those calling for peace and reflection after so much violence and the latent fear that being too explicit might attract negative reactions. So when the Peace Park is opened up to the public in 1997 its features are symbolic. There is no explicit reference to what happened on the grounds, except for the wall with the names of the detained disappeared and the executed, bearing also Héctors name.

The historical moment, the space generated by the Rettig Report and the particular local processes have generated a space where the initiative of a memorial park can rise. In itself it bears contestation and negotiation between different groups, that have different ideas about which story the site should tell, and how it should tell it. The Peace Park in it's original design is a result of that negotiation process on a particular point in time, the nineties, and continues to be negotiated.

### **Political Detention and Torture: the survivors**

Then on 16 October 1998 the impossible happens: Pinochet is detained in London. The Spanish judge Garzón demands the extradition of Pinochet on account of the torture and death of a Spanish citizen in Chile under his regime. The government tries to negotiate a solution for 'the human rights problem' with the Armed Forces who, for the first time, feel the heat of justice. In the end Pinochet is not extradited on account of his fragile health and he returns to Santiago where the memory landscape of

the dictatorship is changing fast. As Chile moves to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coup in 2003 the organisations of the former prisoners, although riddled with internal conflicts, gain momentum and demand reparations from the Chilean government. Court trials are on the increase, and there are several civil law suits against the State. In 2003 President Lagos creates the National Commission on Political Detention and Torture,<sup>9</sup> also known as the Commission Valech. Its goal was to deliver the definite and final proof that during the whole dictatorship from 1973 until 1990 and throughout Chile, from Arica to Punta Arenas, people were detained and tortured for political reasons. The Report has clearly been set up in the mark of reparation. After the family members of the detained disappeared and the dead, it was the turn of the survivors to be repaired.

The Valech Report describes the different periods in the repression and dedicates almost a third of its pages to listings of all the precincts involved.<sup>10</sup> The chapter on torture reads like a catalogue of torture methods, no testimonies are reproduced although anonymous quotes are given. Almost 35.000 persons applied to be taken into account by the Commission. 27.255 persons were recognised as being detained and tortured for political reasons. Rafaël, almost thirty years after the facts and thirteen years after the Rettig Commission, now testifies as a survivor. His name is on the long alphabetical list in the annex of the Valech Report. Since 2004 he receives a life long pension.<sup>11</sup> Many survivors who went to testify before the Valech Commission told me it had been an important moment. For personal reasons and also because the Valech Report entails the official recognition of what happened to them.<sup>12</sup>

The constant contestation by individuals and groups was given wings by historical circumstances, leading to negotiation, allowing for collective memory to become ‘thicker’. This also shows on the local level in Villa Grimaldi where discussions on what to tell and how to tell it, arise again in the slipstream of these historical and national events.

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<sup>9</sup> On 11 November 2003 the Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura (Comisión Valech) is created by Supreme Decree 1.040. The Report was published in November 2004. The Commission received 35.868 testimonies and recognised 27.255 cases. The Commission reconsidered those cases that were not qualified (DTO-1068 November 3, 2004) and published those results on 17 March 2005. Of the 7.290 cases that were reconsidered 1204 were qualified.

<sup>10</sup> Just over one page is dedicated to Villa Grimaldi, the information does hardly differ from the Rettig Commission. (CNPPT 2004: 444)

<sup>11</sup> Ley de Reparación 19.992 created on 24 december 2004

<sup>12</sup> Days before the National Report on Political Detention and Torture was presented the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces officially declared that Armed Forces would assume the contents and the conclusions of the Valech Comisión ‘with [...] serenity and responsibility.’ Speech “Ejército de Chile: el fin de una visión”, Emilio Cheyre, 5 november 2004 (CEP 2005: 505)

## The Tower of Villa Grimaldi

Around 1998 in Villa Grimaldi fierce debates were taking place about the contents of the Park. The group that is in charge of the memorial park<sup>13</sup> is deeply divided about the detention of Pinochet and what the government should do about it. Again voices rise to recreate a part of the detention and torture centre. Former prisoners, many of them now organized on the national level in order to press for recognition and reparations, come to visit and find it hard to relate their experiences to the beautifully laid out gardens. As court cases are on the rise, the survivors are called upon for their testimonies and there is need to be able to somehow substantiate what they are telling. Those who dedicate themselves to the Peace Park and receive visitors for all over the world telling them what happened on those grounds feel they need something to be able to show what ‘really happened’ here. This time these voices win.

In the far left corner of the Park once stood a wooden water tower built to irrigate the gardens and provide the mansion with water. Later it was used as a place of isolation and torture. It was burned to the ground when the Armed Forces left the premises. Originally the idea had been to ask an artist to design a monument, now the wooden tower arose again. Today it is one of the few elements in the Park that brings you into close contact with what happened there. The visitor can crawl into the isolation cells in the tower and at the base of the tower there are reproductions of drawings that prisoners made of the torture methods.



Photo 2, the reconstruction of the old water tower. Visitors can climb to the top floor, past the wooden isolation and torture cells.

11 September 2006, photo by the author.

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<sup>13</sup> Corporación Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi was created on 13 July 1996. The Corporation consists of a president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary and three directors, chosen yearly in the General Assembly.

## **Researching processes of Reconciliation**

In general, definitions of reconciliation in academic literature contain the element of '(re)creating relationships.'<sup>14</sup> In some academic writings the question of reconciliation is posed in terms of what should be done to reach it, allowing for strong top-down perspective. Reconciliation then is intimately linked to ideas of nation building of political elites.<sup>15</sup> Other authors point out that reconciliation is 'forged and lived locally, and that state policies can either facilitate or hinder these processes,' making a case for in dept local research.<sup>16</sup> I would argue that reconciliation is not so much something that policy measures or instruments can provoke if only applied well enough; it is a process that can be found in societies in a post-conflict situation where people are going on with their lives, and it can be read in ideas and actions of (groups of) people and contestations of those ideas and actions by other (groups of) people. I propose to pose the question of reconciliation in terms of a process, which is generated by the constant contestation and negotiation of collective memory which takes place on many levels in a society. This makes local research necessary in order to come to an understanding of processes reconciliation in post-conflict societies.

Where the reality of the people on the ground connects to (legal) instruments such as truth commissions, reparation programmes, judicial processes and international tribunals, is where we can begin to understand how the process of reconciliation works. In that nexus lies an important task for inter-disciplinary work on these themes.

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<sup>14</sup> See for example Staub 2006: 867

<sup>15</sup> For a critical analysis of truth commissions and nation-building see Grandin 2005

<sup>16</sup> See for example Theidon 2006: 456

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