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Justice, Memory, and a Professor's Accusation

One scholar charges another with participating in his torture in Chile, and many academics feel the reverberations

By MICHAEL EASTERBROOK

Santiago, Chile

Felipe Agüero could not believe what he was seeing that day in 1988. Mr. Agüero, at the time an instructor at Duke University, was once more in Chile, a country he had left six years earlier with an overwhelming sense of relief.

Even though about 15 other people were in the room, he couldn't stop thinking about a man on his right. They were sitting around a table at a Santiago hotel, participating in a conference organized by the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences. Mr. Agüero tried to act normal but felt nervous and self-conscious.

"I was staring in disbelief," he recalls. "I couldn't put together the fact that here, in an academic workshop, was a man who I clearly remember as having been in my own personal torture chamber."

When the conference ended, he collected his things and hurried out.

Mr. Agüero, now an associate professor of international and comparative studies at the University of Miami's School of International Studies, would run into the man more than once over the next few years, and eventually would resolve to talk to him about the first time they had met.

During another visit to Santiago, he went to the man's university office but found no one there. As he waited, the fear and anxiety returned, and he crept out of the building before the man came back. After that, he avoided conferences and other academic settings where he thought the man might be. "I thought, if anyone should be feeling bad it should be him, not me."



Miami's Felipe Agüero says he wanted Emilio Meneses' colleagues to know that he had a role in torture. (Photograph by Cindy Karp, Black Star)

In March, 13 years after that unnerving meeting, Mr. Aguero finally tried to ease his pain by confronting its source. In a letter to Catholic University of Chile, he wrote that one of its most prominent professors, Emilio Meneses, was part of a military squad that tortured him in 1973 after the coup in Chile. Mr. Aguero didn't ask for the professor's removal -- he just wanted Mr. Meneses' colleagues to know of his role in the 1973 events. "Of his participation I have no doubt," Mr. Aguero wrote.

Mr. Meneses, a 50-year-old professor at Catholic University's Institute of Political Science, in Santiago, denies the accusation, calling it a crime against him and part of a "concerted effort to destroy my academic career." Now on a paid leave of absence, he is suing Mr. Aguero in Chile, alleging grave injuries to his reputation.

The accusation against Mr. Meneses -- a popular professor who is a nationally known defense analyst in Chile -- has unsettled one of South America's most prestigious universities and is a painful part of the debate about the dark crimes committed during the Chilean military regime's long and bloody rule, crimes that continue to haunt the nation. The case has rippled through academic circles abroad, with some scholars choosing sides. Many, in support of Mr. Aguero, are taking steps to ostracize Mr. Meneses.

"The Aguero case reminds us that today in Chile there are these undercurrents," says Ivan Jaksic, a history professor at the University of Notre Dame who specializes in Latin America. "And when you start scratching the surface, you realize that all is not well."

Similar undercurrents run in other Latin American countries grappling with human-rights violations in the past and the present. Students and faculty members seeking democratic rights have frequently been the victims of military regimes, and scholars whose job it is to understand history and politics are often caught up in controversial investigations of the past. In Peru, a truth commission led by the rector of Lima's Catholic University, Salomon Lerner, is investigating human-rights abuses -- committed both by the government and by rival leftist rebels -- that have left 30,000 people dead since 1980. In Guatemala, anthropologists are exhuming the bodies of people killed in government-directed massacres during a 36-year civil war. In Colombia, students and professors are being murdered in mysterious circumstances, some say at the hands of paramilitary groups.

It was late afternoon on a day near the beginning of October 1973. The military, which had recently taken control of the country, was holding Mr. Aguero and thousands of other political prisoners in Santiago's National Stadium, its towering walls casting a shadow over the vast interior. Suddenly, a voice through the loudspeakers called Mr. Aguero's name.



Emilio Meneses, of Chile's Catholic University: "I am absolutely against torture."
(Photograph by *El Mostrador*)

Mr. Aguero, who was 21 years old at the time and a sociology student at Catholic University, had been stopped by a military patrol two weeks before while driving with a classmate, Fernando Villagran.

The two students were carrying documents from a moderate leftist political party in which they were active. When the soldiers discovered the papers, they pummeled the students with rifle butts, then took them to a building at Santiago's El Bosque air-force base.

There a soldier ripped up Mr. Aguero's shirt, blindfolded him with a piece of the fabric, and ordered him to run at full speed. Each time he ran, he collided with walls and other prisoners. Later he was told to lie on the floor, where he was kicked and beaten. He momentarily blacked out after receiving a rifle blow to his ear.

One of the officers stationed at the base that day was Jorge Silva, then a young captain. He recalls that by the time the two students reached him, they were exhausted and badly beaten. He gave Mr. Aguero a cup of coffee and a blanket, and allowed the two students to harmonize their stories before being interrogated by another officer.

The captain's kindness struck Mr. Aguero as unusual, but there was a reason for it. Mr. Silva knew that he himself was also regarded as suspect by the new regime -- indeed, he was arrested three weeks later, tortured, and, after more than three years in prison, deported.

Speaking from his home in London, Mr. Silva says that soon after the two students arrived, he learned that some soldiers planned to kill them that night. "The only thing I could do was to have them taken immediately with the prisoners who were going to be moved to the National Stadium," says Mr. Silva, now an operations manager for an air-cargo company.

The two students were loaded onto a bus filled with people from a poor barrio. Several buses of prisoners left the compound in a convoy with military vehicles.

During the ride, Mr. Aguero, watching helplessly as a soldier struck his friend's skull repeatedly with a rifle, began to worry that he would be killed. When the convoy arrived at the stadium, soldiers beat the prisoners again as they disembarked.

Mr. Silva was hitching a ride home with one of the vehicles in the convoy. He recalls that as the prisoners were being unloaded, soldiers gunned down three people near a pile of at least 15 corpses. As his vehicle was leaving the stadium, a soldier stopped it and ordered him and the other passengers to take away two bodies. When he protested, the soldier explained that there were orders that no vehicle was to leave empty. Mr. Silva and his fellow passengers dumped the bodies at a nearby subway station.

"It was something really terrible," he says of his glimpse of what was going on at the stadium. "They were killing people in such an open way. They were taking no precautions."

Mr. Aguero, after falling asleep on the clay floor of the stadium, was awakened by soldiers

the next morning and taken to a cramped locker room, where he would live for most of the next four weeks.

"We would just stand there and move around with difficulty and talk to other people and worry, basically, and try to hold on to our bread for as long as we could," says Mr. Aguero, who pieced together his ordeal during several interviews and in a 10-page letter for his lawyer.

When he heard his name being called over the stadium's loudspeakers two weeks later, he had been there long enough to know what it meant.

When Gen. Augusto Pinochet toppled President Allende's socialist government on September 11, 1973, the military released a wave of terror that wouldn't subside for years. Soldiers and plainclothes security forces pulled suspected leftists out of their homes and offices, yanked them from the streets, and took them to makeshift detention camps, where many were tortured and killed.

The most notorious of these short-term concentration camps was in the National Stadium, an enormous facility now used once more for soccer tournaments and concerts. In *Estadio Nacional* (Editorial Sudamericana, 2000), Adolfo Cozzi, who used to work at Santiago's Catholic University and is now a scriptwriter, described his experiences as a prisoner at the stadium. He wrote of inmates' being deloused with DDT, of torture by electric shock, of the stench of decaying corpses. Others chronicling the human-rights violations of the Pinochet regime's early days have described events at the stadium similarly -- frequent beatings, torture, and smells and sounds that were hard to escape.

During General Pinochet's 17-year rule, the armed forces killed more than 3,000 people -- 1,158 of whom were still missing long after the dictatorship ended, according to two government human-rights commissions convened after the general stepped down. Some 400,000 people were tortured, says Veronica Reyna, a lawyer with the Christian Church's Social Help Foundation, a private human-rights group.

Even though recent civilian governments in Chile have done much to reveal the dictatorship's awful legacy, human-rights violations committed during General Pinochet's rule were long viewed throughout much of society as forbidden topics. Even under civilian rule, the military was still strong, and democratic rights were fragile. General Pinochet remained head of the army until 1998.



General Pinochet.
(Photograph by Diego Goldberg, Sygma)

But the taboo on discussing torture ended in October 1998, when British police arrested the aging general, who had seemed invincible, while he was recovering from back surgery at a London clinic.

"That is the moment when people contemplated this festering wound and decided to talk about it," says Mr. Jaksic, the Notre Dame professor, who was a Chilean university student when the coup broke out, and who later fled the country.

Suddenly, the crimes committed during the dictatorship became a topic one could read about in the press and hear discussed on the streets and in academic conferences. It also prompted thousands of people who had been tortured during the dictatorship, including Mr. Aguero, to begin grappling with their personal nightmares.

Jorge Pantoja, who leads a team of six psychologists and psychiatrists treating many of those torture victims at the social-help foundation, says nearly all of the patients clearly remember the faces of their torturers. "The trauma is so strong, so profound, that the mind makes a vivid record of the impression that lasts for a long time."

And it's not uncommon for his patients to run into their torturers in the workplace, on the streets, and even at cocktail parties, he says. The encounters usually produce feelings of terror, and few dare to confront them. Those who speak out risk reprisals.

Last year, two members of Funa -- a private organization that organizes demonstrations in front of the homes and offices of alleged torturers -- received death threats after denouncing two men in the armed forces, says Michelle Retamal, a spokeswoman for the group.

Because of a five-year statute of limitations on torture crimes in Chile, accusers have almost no hope of seeking justice through the courts.

That day in the stadium, Mr. Aguero was too scared to move when he heard his name.

It was only after he was called again that he walked to the designated area and noticed people in the bleachers above looking at him through binoculars. After waiting for what seemed like a long time, soldiers approached, placed a hood over his head, and made him run up the bleachers, beating him with their rifles whenever he tripped and fell.

Still hooded, he was led up the stairs where he could hear moaning and screaming. After being thrown against a wall, his hands were tied behind his back and his legs spread open. He was told to lean against the wall so that his forehead was supporting the weight of his body. Every time he moved to relieve the pain, he was kicked and beaten.

After a while he was led to a room and ordered to strip naked, except for the hood. From the voices, he figured there were three to five people around him. Questions were shouted in rapid fire about his fellow students, professors, and the location of his alleged arms cache,

which the guards assumed that each of the prisoners had stashed away somewhere.

"They viewed us all as dangerous terrorists," he says.

As he was barraged with questions, Mr. Agüero was beaten repeatedly on the back and buttocks with a weapon that he guessed to be two short poles covered with wire and joined by a rope. Between the beatings, his torturers would run a metal instrument over his genitals, grind his toes into the floor with their boots, and burn the tips of his fingers with cigarettes.

Finally, they ordered him to dress. While he was putting on his clothes, the hood momentarily rose from his eyes, and in that moment he saw before him a young, uniformed man wearing what Mr. Agüero remembers as a very determined expression. Fifteen years later, at the conference in Santiago, he would identify the man as Emilio Meneses.

Mr. Meneses, the son of a navy officer, was a 23-year-old student at the University of Chile and a navy reservist when he was called to report for duty at the National Stadium. It was five days after the coup, the same day Mr. Agüero and his friend were detained. "I didn't choose to be called in," says Mr. Meneses, speaking by phone from his farmhouse outside Santiago. "I didn't choose to go to the National Stadium."

He would be stationed at the stadium for about three weeks. Afterward, he enrolled at Catholic University.

The private institution, founded in 1888, wasn't spared from the military's stranglehold. Soon after the coup, the junta appointed a former admiral, Jorge Swett, to run the university. Under his command, two social-science departments were shut down and at least 50 professors were fired as part of a campaign to rid the campus of what the admiral viewed as the "malignant" influence of Marxist ideology, according to an official history.

Mr. Meneses, after graduating, earned his Ph.D. at the University of Oxford and eventually returned to Chile to teach at Catholic University, which today has some 2,000 professors and 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students.

On the modern campus, Mr. Meneses has become a divisive figure. Soon after Mr. Agüero's letter was made public in the local press this spring, some political-science students met to discuss the position they were going to take, but failed to reach an agreement. While some argued that Mr. Meneses should be allowed to stay, others boycotted his classes and urged



Soldiers and tanks patrolled outside the National Stadium after the military deposed Salvador Allende's socialist government. (Photograph by Valery Vieillescazes, Sygma)

authorities to remove him.

"He has to go," says one student, 18-year-old Anastasia Gonzalez. "He's not morally fit to mold the minds of young people."

Even though the students remain divided, nearly all agree that Mr. Meneses is one of the best professors at Institute of Political Science. They describe him as a captivating lecturer with an ironic sense of humor, a formal but likable man who made students take off their caps upon entering the classroom.

"It's easy to make an accusation, but a different thing to prove it," says Sebastian Veta, a political-science student. "I hope he returns, because he was a good professor."

Mr. Meneses left a different impression on some of his colleagues. "He's a difficult person to deal with in terms of his personality," says Alfredo Rehren, director of the institute, who received Mr. Aguero's letter. "He doesn't give up, and he's hard to convince of other positions."

Mr. Meneses was granted a paid leave of absence in order to "clear up his situation" in court, says Mr. Rehren. That is a process that could take years. Faculty members have met to discuss the problem, but Mr. Rehren says the professor's fate will be decided by the rector, Pedro Pablo Rosso. Through his secretary, Mr. Rosso denied repeated requests for an interview.

Even though few academics believe that the university can fire Mr. Meneses solely on the basis of the torture allegation, most Chilean academics have closed ranks behind Mr. Aguero. And nearly 200 scholars in the United States, South America, Europe, and Japan have signed a letter pledging to boycott any university event or public forum that Mr. Meneses attends. Among the signers were Jorge I. Domingues, director of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University and a former president of the Latin American Studies Association; Peter Lange, provost of Duke University; and Eusebio Mujal-Leon, chairman of the government department at Georgetown University. While the letter reserves final judgment on Mr. Aguero's accusation, it sharply criticizes the "complacent and self-congratulatory" manner in which Mr. Meneses has described his military duties in interviews with the press. Following the coup, Mr. Meneses insists, he did no more than interview people from behind a desk and pass them on to other interrogators if their answers didn't match the facts.

"He has said that he did everything right while at the stadium, but what bothers me is that people were killed there," says Patricio Navia, a graduate student and Chilean scholar at New York University's Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. He wrote the boycott letter signed by scholars from around the world.

Paul Drake, dean of social sciences at the University of California at San Diego, says he usually isn't eager to sign petitions. But in this case, he wanted to do so. "I felt it was an important act of solidarity with someone who had suffered under a military regime and then found out one of his interrogators was a university faculty member."

Mr. Navia, who visits Chile frequently, says talk among Chilean academics is rife with speculation about the accusation.

Despite their support for Mr. Aguero, some academics believe that Mr. Meneses is being unfairly condemned, Mr. Navia says, although none have moved to defend him publicly, because they are so clearly in the minority.

During an hourlong conversation, Mr. Meneses offers a strikingly different portrait of the National Stadium than that described by some of its former prisoners, as well as by the scholars and journalists who have written about the early days of the Pinochet regime.

Each day around 8 a.m., he says, he was picked up by a military vehicle at his home and driven to the stadium, where he was assigned to take down information from prisoners and to write reports on those brief interrogations for a military prosecutor. Around 5 p.m., usually exhausted, he was taken home.

"I am absolutely against torture, and I want to make that quite clear," says Mr. Meneses. "From the moment I was called in, I decided that I was going to do my duty according to the Geneva Convention and my own Catholic conscience, and there was always room for that."

He says he never mistreated a single prisoner and never witnessed other prisoners being tortured. The first time he heard of the horror stories occurring in the stadium was near the end of his service, from people on the street.

Mr. Meneses says the first time he met Mr. Aguero was three years ago. He believes that Mr. Aguero has committed a crime against him under Chilean law but seems even more infuriated over his colleagues' boycott. "They are denying me the most basic right, the right to be considered innocent until proven guilty," he says.

At the stadium, after Mr. Aguero dressed, he was led outside and forced to sing "We Will Conquer," a song from Popular Unity, the Allende coalition. As he sang, jeering soldiers beat him with their rifles. Later he was interrogated a second time. A soldier warned him to prepare for the worst if the information he gave was incorrect.

He was put in a windowless storage room and left there for two and a half days without food or water. He had a pack of cigarettes in his pocket but nothing to light them with. When he was released, he was sent back to the locker room, where the other prisoners avoided him. "They feared that we had all been turned around, that we would become informants," he says.

Several days later, he and about 100 other prisoners were taken to a part of the stadium where

bicycle races had been held. Along the way, they passed another group of inmates coming from the same area. Among them was Mr. Villagran, the student with whom Mr. Aguero had been arrested. When Mr. Villagran saw his friend, he stared at him intensely and then ran a finger across his own neck in a throat-cutting gesture.

Mr. Aguero and the others in his group were given blankets and told to put them over their heads. They soon arrived at a spot where he could hear screams so awful that he imagined the soldiers were extracting the prisoners' eyes or toenails. Once again, he was forced to run with his head covered, colliding with walls each time. Later, a man approached and punched him in the testicles, demanding to know the names of his comrades and the location of his arms supply.

Finally, he was ordered to drop his pants and to lie on his back. He felt what seemed to be electrodes being placed on his penis, testicles, armpits, and tongue. Moments later, electricity was jolting through him, wracking his body, and the only thing he could do was close his eyes and scream. Afterwards, he was forced to listen to the cries of other prisoners as they were tortured.

After more than 14 days of beatings and torture, the worst was now over. Within less than two more weeks, Mr. Aguero and Mr. Villagran were taken to a public jail, where they would once again see Mr. Silva, the young captain, who had been sent there after being tortured at an air-force academy for 25 days. Some four months later, the students were set free.

After graduating from Catholic University, Mr. Aguero went to the United States and earned a Ph.D. in political science at Duke University in 1991. With Jeffrey Stark, a colleague at the University of Miami, he wrote *Fault Lines of Democracy in Post-Transition Latin America*, (North-South Center Press, 1998), which analyzes the consolidation of Latin American democracies and their weaknesses. A reviewer in *Foreign Affairs* called it a "major contribution to the field."

At his farm outside the capital, Mr. Meneses has used his spare time to do research on Chilean foreign policy and to raise cattle. Having to cope with the accusation, he says, has brought him closer to his two children, who are students at Catholic University. He says that Mr. Aguero's accusation is part of an effort to sabotage his career, but that he can find no reasonable motive for it. He regrets that Mr. Aguero didn't wait longer in his office on the day he came to see him. "Why have two grown men, two academics, come to this?" Mr. Meneses wonders. "It's a difficult question to answer."

Mr. Aguero says it wasn't vengeance that motivated him to reveal his secret, but a nagging



In 1973, soldiers from General Augusto Pinochet's regime kept prisoners in Chile's National Stadium and forced them to wear blankets as hoods.

feeling that by hiding it he was allowing his colleagues to be deceived. In an interview he gave in a popular magazine, *Cosas*, shortly after sending his letter to Catholic University, he never mentions Mr. Meneses's name, and says he still doesn't know how the letter was made public.

In July, he returned to Santiago to challenge the lawsuit, a decision that could put him in prison if he loses the case. Even though Mr. Aguero wasn't under court order to return, he believes that if he were to ignore the lawsuit, he would be giving Mr. Meneses free rein to present a "distorted" history of the events at the National Stadium. That prospect disturbs him perhaps even more than going back to jail.

"The stadium was a place where people were tortured and killed," says Mr. Aguero. "And I want the discussion of what happened there to resume for the benefit of the historic record."

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