

PREFACE FROM THE MANAGING EDITORS

Points on a Continuum of Violence and Deprivation

Mike Larsen and Justin Piché

This is an important and powerful issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP), and it has been a privilege to watch it come together. Issue editors Christine Gervais and Maritza Felices-Luna solicited and compiled the articles, while members of our Editorial Board handled the peer-reviewing. Thus, our first serious encounter with the issue involved reading the completed draft manuscript in a single intense and emotionally-trying sitting. Encountering these narratives of violation, dehumanization, survival, resistance and remembrance can leave the reader speechless – but only for a short time. Ultimately, they invite solidarity, mobilization and action.

In some ways, this issue represents a departure from familiar *JPP* terrain, both geographically and in terms of subject matter. The inclusion of the voices of prisoners from El Salvador, Honduras, Iran and Sri Lanka extends the scope of our ongoing exploration of the carceral, and, like our special issue on “post”-colonial Nigeria (Volume 14-1, 2005), brings welcomed non-western perspectives. In other ways, this issue continues and builds upon important recurring themes explored by *JPP* contributors: systematized violence, the collateral consequences of incarceration, the universal character of the experiences of confinement and its lingering effects, the enduring importance of writing as resistance, and broad questions about the nature and pursuit of justice as well as accountability. Torture, both physical and psychological, has been discussed in a number of past *JPP* articles. Volume 15-1 (2006) was dedicated to the theme of political imprisonment, broadly conceived as the use of imprisonment as a tactic to stifle political dissent, and other special issues – on Irish republican prisoners (Volume 7-1, 1996-1997) and on the Black Panther Party (Volume 15-2 / 16-1, 2006-2007), for example – have also focused on the accounts of political prisoners. Many past contributors have argued persuasively that *all* imprisonment is inherently political.

This volume of the *JPP* is the first that has been entirely dedicated to the combined theme of torture and political imprisonment. While many of the accounts in this collection speak of incidents that occurred decades ago, they continue to be timely, as practices of torture, indefinite detention without charge or trial, and refoulement² remain fixtures of contemporary (in)security campaigns led by authoritarian and nominally democratic regimes alike. Meanwhile, the public debate about torture – and it shocks

the conscience that there is *actually a debate* – is heavily influenced by callous instrumental discourses that contemplate torture as a necessary and permissible means to a legitimate end, make use of official euphemisms such as “enhanced interrogation” or “rendition”, and employ careful denials of direct involvement or knowledge made possible by outsourcing and the use of proxies. Countering these narratives involves challenging the sanitized language and hypothetical ‘ticking bomb’ scenarios of proponents and apologists by presenting the accounts of victims and survivors of torture, which is what this issue of the *JPP* sets out to do. This resonates with our overarching mission, which is in part to facilitate the development of a discourse that competes with incomplete, popular and conventional definitions and constructions of prisoners and methods of social control, and in part to promote accountability and basic human rights.¹

In reflecting upon the many contributions made by the authors in this volume, it seems important to underscore what Angela Davis (2005, p. 62) recognizes as the “essential connections between everyday prison violence and torture”, as well as between the carceral sites of the domestic prison, the military prison and the immigration detention centre. As she suggests, “[r]ather than rely on a taxonomy of those acts that are defined as torture and those that are not, it may be more revealing to examine how one set of institutionalized practices actually enables the other” (Davis, 2005, p. 63). Similar arguments have been made by others (see Dayan 2007; McCulloch and Scraton 2009) including *JPP* Associate Editor Charles Huckelbury (2006), who notes that the routine and ‘mundane’ abuses that characterize U.S. prisons are generally accepted and explained away by a public that is complicit in the maintenance of the carceral system. There are many threads linking these everyday cruelties to the acts of systematic brutality described by the contributors to this issue. We mention this not to suggest a simplistic equivalency between all experiences of confinement, violation and coercion, but rather to draw attention to the institutions, practices and forms of power and resistance that link all encounters with the carceral. These issues will certainly be front and centre at the *Thirteenth International Conference on Penal Abolition* (ICOPA XIII) taking place in Belfast this summer, where ongoing efforts towards policing and justice reform are taking place in the shadow of a history of political violence and incarceration.

The quality of a text arguably lies in its ability to captivate the attention of readers and to compel them to ponder new questions or revisit old ones with new lenses. When reading this collection, you may find yourself reconsidering the meaning of justice and accountability at a time when these concepts have been colonized by retributively-oriented

authorities who prefer to operate in secrecy. You may also find yourself reconsidering the limits of the human spirit, courage and forgiveness. In seeking direction for how to respond to ‘crimes’, whether committed by those in positions of power or the poor, the authors in this volume remind us that prisoners – who have experienced the various points along the continuum of violence and deprivation – have a great deal to contribute and ought to occupy a central place in the debate about our (post-)carceral future.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For *JPP* Mission see <http://www.jpp.org/Mission.html>.
- ² Refoulement is the deportation or removal of refugees to places where they may be persecuted, which is prohibited by international law. Canada recognizes this prohibition, but in its 2002 ruling in the *Suresh* case, the Supreme Court of Canada stated that “We do not exclude the possibility that in exceptional circumstances, deportation to face torture might be justified, either as a consequence of the balancing process mandated by S.7 of the Charter or under S.1”. While the executive has never invoked the so-called ‘Suresh exception’, its existence illustrates the extent to which all branches of government – including the judiciary – have succumbed to the temptation to entertain hypothetical limits to the absolute prohibition of torture.

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Footprints to Freedom: Journeys of State-Driven Torture, Liberation and Justice

Christine Gervais and Maritza Felices-Luna

*Bloody footprints left behind by prisoners as they are
forced to walk out of the torture chamber.*

*The bloody print of a naked foot intentionally etched
on the wall of a prisoner's cell.*

*Boot marks perturbing the quiet pools of blood on the
floor of an interrogation room.*

The footprint images depicted by the contributors to this edition¹ of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* embody the oppressive relation between those subjected to torture and the government officials who are indoctrinated to consider the former a threat to the state. The extreme violence deployed on the body, mind and soul of prisoners aimed at dehumanising them is constructed by government representatives as legitimate practices of justice in detention centres around the world. In such confining and brutalizing contexts, prisoners vanish in the “belly of the beast” (Abbot, 1981) – a place strategically hidden from view to hinder human rights monitoring and regulation by local civil society as well as the international community. Such clandestine arrangements form part of the calculated orchestration and to some extent the normalization of state-based denial and deception related to torture and other human rights abuses in penal settings (Cohen, 2001; Crelinsten, 2003; Matthews and Kauzlarich, 2007).

Such collusion fortifies the combined use of imprisonment and torture as tools of oppressive regimes to control, distort, weaken and even erase people's memories (Mandela, 2005, p. 9). Yet, the authors in this issue have manifested their challenge against the state-based attacks on their memories both through acts of resistance during their incarceration and through writing their narratives in this journal. The first instance is exemplified particularly in the aforementioned image of the bloody footprint intentionally etched on the prison wall. As is shared in more detail later in Anahita Rahmanizadeh's narrative, the image is derived from her memory of a fellow captive's courageous and deliberate attempt to leave a concrete reminder of his existence and suffering at the prison prior to his execution. Such an act is a powerful symbol not only of

resistance against injustice, but also of the struggle toward justice which often involves the painful pitting of remembering against forgetting (Mandela, 2005, p. 9; Cohen, 2001, pp. 237, 241).

In the second instance, although exceedingly taxing emotionally for the authors, they have shown an admirable determination to remember their experiences in an effort to overcome their torturers' attack on their minds and bodies. By sharing their memories that have been variously dominated by state power, they have unravelled paralysing silences (Mandela, 2005, p. 9). In so doing, they have contributed to broader academic and grassroots efforts to thwart states' denials of the human rights atrocities for which they are responsible (Cohen, 1996, p. 522; Kauzlarich *et al.*, 2001, p. 185; Rothe and Friedrichs, 2006, p. 148).

It is through the means of '*truth-telling*' and towards the end of '*never again*' that we have compiled the stories and privileged the voices of women and men who have endured torture and the deprivation of liberty at the hands of the state, along with those of surviving family members (French, 2009). The authors are all former political prisoners or surviving relatives who, at the time of writing their narratives, were residing in Canada as refugees, immigrants and / or citizens. The four female and four male authors originate from either Central America or the Middle East. Their stories reflect on concurrent conditions of imprisonment, violence, resistance and justice in various forms and through distinct phases.

In their narratives, the authors also depict the society they lived in prior to their arrest as being characterised by state-based systemic violence and seemingly permanent situations of rampant injustice. Through a diversity of paths, including active involvement in state opposition, as a bystander or simply being part of the constructed "enemy" group, the authors found themselves detained. While the contributors describe candidly the extreme state-based violence they suffered, their narratives also convey their strategies of survival and resistance which, despite varying in form – violent, non-violent, physical, psychological, and so on – were aimed to ensure their survival and preserve their dignity and humanity. Although torture is a central element in their detention experience, the authors also address the overall living conditions, their personal use of the physical space of their cell and of the prison, as well as the life-saving, life-breaking and life-taking relations with other political and non-political prisoners, and with prison guards. To varying degrees, the authors reflect upon such dynamics through gendered, cultural, religious and age-appropriate lenses.²

A significant commonality among the narratives is the centrality of government, imprisonment and justice after their release. In fact, freedom is never actually fully obtained and nor does state violence really end

upon the authors' release from prison. Their respective governments have discriminated against them, limited their possibility of obtaining a livelihood, restricted their reintegration into society and threatened to arrest and torture them again at any time. In some cases, the authors in this collection were actually detained and tortured twice. Furthermore, the psychological and social consequences of their detention and torture are such that the authors find themselves imprisoned by their experience. This prison, despite lacking physical barriers, is just as restraining and violent. The authors cannot escape the memories and find themselves not only reliving their experiences of detention and torture, but they also become further isolated from family and friends due to emotional and physical disconnections. As a result, the formerly tortured and imprisoned, as well as their family members find themselves constricted emotionally, economically, socially and politically.

Due to the state and non-state barriers inhibiting the viability of their future, the contributors find themselves with exile as the only option available to them. The decision to leave their country is difficult and fraught with uncertainties. It becomes another source of pain and anguish as they are confronted with the scepticism of bureaucrats. Their pursuit of freedom and safety through immigration involves an endless telling and retelling of their experiences which in turn are challenged and in some cases refuted. As such, immigration becomes in itself an intrusive process orchestrated by representatives of the very government from which they are seeking help. Caught amidst the increasingly criminalising, and therefore restrictive and punitive refugee policies (Pickering, 2005), some authors actually re-experienced imprisonment when they were detained in refugee camps while their claims were investigated. This process represents yet another type of warped practice of 'justice' in which the authors are confronted with the violence of a state legitimised by the threat that they allegedly represent. In fact, the procedure to obtain refugee status forces the authors to demonstrate that their lives are at risk and to prove that they have actually been tortured or persecuted. If unsuccessful, they risk a new cycle of detention, torture and death. Hence, the long wait required by the process is filled with distress and uncertainty which fuels the negative consequences of torture and detention and further weakens an already frail individual. However, once the contributors are granted refugee status or are allowed to immigrate, another form of imprisonment ensues. They are confronted with a different culture, language and system which, compounded by their experiences of torture and detention, traps them within invisible walls. The authors and their families are thus locked in a cycle which condemns them to further emotional withdrawal, solitude, anger and frustration.

Notwithstanding this trying process and utmost gruelling experiences, the authors reveal that amidst this internal and external turmoil, they encounter individuals and organisations that help them economically, psychologically, legally and socially to create conditions where they can be released from the invisible prison they had unwillingly co-constructed with their captors. Furthermore, resistance strategies continue to be engaged in order to survive and salvage a sense of the self that existed before their detention and torture. Part of their strategies of resistance is to conceptualise justice in a different way from what they have experienced through their ordeal. The authors thus battle within themselves to be released from the yearning of retributive justice towards their captors and torturers and to embrace a form of restorative justice that acknowledges the harm caused and responsabilises those involved.

This special issue on torture is an important contribution to debates on imprisonment, state and justice. Through a discussion of this “extreme” display of state power, the authors reveal and expose the cogs and components of a system where the use of violence by the state takes place within its prisons and is legitimised through a corrupted appeal to justice and the use of the justice system. Furthermore, the contributions unveil the continuity of these practices and of their consequences through time and space as they become embodied in the prisoner and their family. Thus, the state no longer requires prison walls or the torturer to exercise its power over its subjects. The prisoner and their families are hence left to “resist or perish” in a battle taking place within themselves. A successful resistance requires the exteriorisation and disembodiment of the state’s practices and their consequences, a reconstruction of social bonds, a re-conceptualisation of justice and a transformation of the tie between the citizen and the state. Although such resistance appears to be individualistic, it follows the same logic and hence is in fact the particularised mode and process of a larger movement aiming to challenge and criticise the triad: state, prison and justice.

In “Survival by Solidarity”, Adrian López shares for the first time a profoundly moving account of his arduous experience of torture, imprisonment and survival as a teacher and prisoner advocate turned political prisoner in El Salvador. López’s reflection sheds powerful light on the universality of human suffering, the complexities of political resistance and the enduring value of solidarity. He also shares a torture survivor’s vision of justice that is beyond his own personal needs – one that is oriented instead toward collective well-being and shared progress.

Within the context of political repression in Iran, Saeideh’s article “With My Child In Jail” recounts her and her infant son’s traumatic long term incarceration that began with a torturous and sexually violent

interrogation with her four month old child by her side. Her guilt-ridden sexual exchange with a guard for food to save the life of her dying infant reflects the all too frequently deceptive relations between male captors and female captives. Saeideh's narrative also sheds light on an imprisoned mother's resourcefulness and her child's resilience in the face of unimaginable obstacles in stifling and disease-ridden prison conditions.

In "A Daughter's Cry for Justice", Osiris López provides a child's unique perspective on the enduring emotional impact of political oppression, torture and disappearance in Honduras. Her reflection on the complex contexts of loss through a parent's brutal death and of the subsequent displacement through forced migration sheds light on the shifting and varied spaces of confinement. Her reflexive account of her pursuit of justice demonstrates the fragility and seeming irreconcilability inherent to the simultaneous quest for retribution and healing.

In "My Changing Idea of Justice", Ezat Mossallanejed provides a compelling autobiographical account of how his prolonged experience of torture and imprisonment in Iran as well as his challenging encounters as a refugee and eventually as a counsellor have shaped and re-shaped his evolving and profound sense of justice. Mossallanejed's deep insight into coping, reconciliation and resilience illustrates the remarkable potential of human resourcefulness to mitigate the experiences of torture and injustice.

In "Reflections of an Iranian Political Prisoner", Minoo Homily recounts her four year ordeal as a Kurdish adolescent female in Iranian prisons, torture chambers and execution yards which began at the age of fifteen. While exploring her own journey through various perceptions of justice over time, Homily sheds light on the socio-political context of Iran, as well as on the persecution of Iranian minorities and political dissidents.

In "Justice Beyond My Ordeal", Anahita Rahmanizadeh's narrative explores her own experience of torture and injustice to illustrate the significance of the ideal of justice as an impetus for the resistance of oppression. Her account also draws attention to the particular plight of female political prisoners in the context of patriarchal Iranian society.

Krishnabahawan Karalapillai's personal account on "Torture, Justice and the Agony of Immigration" is a testament to the pervasive impact that torture has on the mental health of survivors. He further reflects on the endless obstacles that he has faced with Canadian immigration as a torture survivor who struggles with mental illness. Throughout his ordeals, he has remained committed to a vision of justice that promotes compassion, faith and accessibility.

Within the gripping details of “My Journey from Torture to Harmony”, Daniel shares a personal narrative on the lingering traumatic effects of torture and imprisonment in El Salvador. In addition to his reflection on the unique interactions between political and non-political prisoners, Daniel shares with extraordinary passion both the pitfalls and potential of healing-oriented justice and forgiveness towards oneself, one’s family and even one’s state.

Following the main articles, the issue continues with a *Response* by Alex Neve of Amnesty International Canada through which he reflects on the universal and enduring effects of torture by situating the authors’ personal experiences from twenty years ago within the context of contemporary political challenges in the fight against torture. The *Prisoners’ Struggles* section of this issue includes overviews of the resources available to torture survivors and their families in North America and Europe through the following organizations: Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC International), the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT), the Canadian Centre for International Justice (CCIJ) and Le Centre Exil. The issue closes with book reviews of William Sampson’s *Confessions of an Innocent Man: Torture and Survival in a Saudi Prison*, Kerry Pither’s *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror* and Richard Matthews’ *The Absolute Violation: Why Torture Must Be Prohibited*. Front and back cover art are provided by Daniel, a contributing author to this issue.

The testimonies shared in this issue constitute experiences of detention and torture that occurred in the last quarter of the 20th century. In the cases from Central America, atrocities were perpetrated by Latin American militaries financed and supported politically by the United States (McSherry and Mejia, 1999), who also taught them the use of barbaric ‘interrogation’ tactics through the notorious School of the Americas.³ The cases from the Middle East represent the complex ironies of being tortured under regimes that are partially supported by the West, yet simultaneously fighting against it. In all the experiential accounts herein, the authors have grappled with the devastating human consequences of national state terror that has been corrupted and compounded by the political and economic influences of other countries.

As we near the end to the first decade of the 21st century, unfortunately the shadows of state repression still haunt much of the world. The long term effects of torture and disappearances, as well as the prevalence of impunity hinder both individual and collective quests for justice and peace. Worse still, the depraved indifferences towards human life as

manifested through torture and disappearances remain an undeniable and unending reality for countless individuals, families, communities and countries around the world today. It is the extent of the continued use of torture worldwide that behoved us to combine our scholarship with activism (Wise, 1999, p. 184), with a view to enabling the voices of unknown or less well known torture survivors to contribute to the academic debates that attempt to draw closer attention within criminology not only to state crime, but especially to the actual harms inflicted against people that result from state action (Green and Ward 2000; Matthews and Kauzlarich, 2007; Kauzlarich *et al.*, 2001).

The very personal and grounded accounts of torture presented in this issue further reflect the vital importance of continued efforts to scrutinize the illegal, inhuman and violent activities of states (Tomb and Whyte, 2003), to hold them responsible for the psychiatric health and therapeutic needs of its citizens (Moon, 2009), and to persist unflinchingly at preventing torture from occurring in the first place (Crelinsten, 2003). The testimonies included herein are also indicative of the significance of human rights and justice as integral components of national stability and international peace (Monshipouri and Welch, 2001, p. 401). On individual levels, through the sharing of their own truth, the authors have revealed their experiences and expectations of justice as victim-survivors and rights-bearers (Laplante and Theidon, 2007). By reflecting on their evolving visions of justice in the aftermath of their ordeals, they have shed light on both the challenges and potential of their chosen, yet varied options that include retributive, restorative, reconciliatory and social justice. Regardless of the complexities that may emerge through their diverse quests for justice, torture survivors must always be given inclusive opportunities to inform post-detention and post-conflict initiatives that encourage acknowledgement, accountability, redress and ultimately prevention so as to safeguard the human rights to which they are entitled as fellow world citizens.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This edition of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* originated in a workshop entitled “Experiencing War, Conceptualizing Justice” that we co-chaired during the Laboratory for Justice Studies and Research (LJSR)’s 1st International Symposium that was held on April 12, 2007 within the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. The symposium’s theme was “Thinking About (In)Justices”.

- ² Here ‘age-appropriate’ refers to the authors’ retrospective reflections of their experiences that occurred in the distant past and in some cases, from the perspectives of adults reflecting on their childhood experiences.
- ³ The School of the Americas was renamed the Western Hemispheric Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC) in 2001. However, it is still commonly referred to as its original name of School of the Americas. To its critics, it is referred to as the School of Assassins.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Christine Gervais is an Assistant Professor in Criminology at the University of Ottawa. She obtained her Ph.D. in Sociology at Carleton University. Her teaching and research areas include children's and women's human rights, crimes against humanity, international development and education in Latin America, social justice, peace building, human trafficking, as well as women's rights and roles in religious institutions. She has contributed to educational programming for children, youth and adults in prisons in Bolivia, Canada, Honduras and Nicaragua. She is a member of both the Laboratory for Justice Studies and Research in the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Interdisciplinary Research Laboratory on the Rights of the Child in the Faculty of Law at the University of Ottawa.

Maritza Felices-Luna is an Assistant Professor in Criminology at the University of Ottawa. She came to Canada from Peru to study Criminology at Université de Montréal where she conducted her master's and doctoral research on internal armed conflict. Her research and teaching areas of interest are political violence, armed conflict and qualitative methodology. She has conducted extensive qualitative fieldwork in Peru, Belfast and Lubumbashi (Democratic Republic of Congo). She is a member of the Laboratory for Justice Studies and Research in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ottawa.

Survival by Solidarity

Adrian López

While many people associate incarceration with “justice” in what are defined as criminal cases, my political struggles against injustice are what ironically led to my imprisonment and torture in El Salvador in September 1989 when I was 24 years old. I was employed in the mornings as a teacher by the Ministry of Education, and thus by the state, in one of the largest public schools in the capital of San Salvador. In the afternoon, I studied to obtain a Bachelor of Education at the National University of El Salvador. I became politically active in my second year. It was a tumultuous and repressive time in the country, and my university studies were impacting my thoughts and actions. I had been raised in a traditional conservative family headed by my sweet and sensitive paternal grandmother who influenced me greatly to obey the law and respect authority. In retrospect, my grandmother, like countless Salvadorans, had been brainwashed by the government propaganda that maintained oppressive control. So in my family’s conscience, state corruption did not exist. I discovered and absorbed “the truth” in my studies at the National University which had become critical, politically active and militant under the repressive and corrupted political climate and civil conflict that had paralyzed El Salvador as well as much of Central America in the 1980s. The university was committed to helping society move forward and away from the barbaric deception. Professors were openly critical and the university invested in social projects that helped the poor majority. I poured my heart and soul into the university’s human rights philosophy and activities.

STUDENT SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM

I initially joined the students’ association in my faculty of education. I eventually became a member of the executive. We led many projects most of which helped students, particularly poor students, with many of the barriers that they faced, including bus fares and other school related costs. I was later elected President of SECH (Sociedad de Estudiantes de Ciencias y Humanidades), which was the students’ association for all the humanities of the university. While we continued to support the student body internally, our country was in such a chaotic condition that our external work was solely focused on overcoming the repression. The university’s students and personnel were frequently facing persecution from the state’s military regime. A lot of the students, especially from the humanities, were being jailed, disappeared and killed. If you were

stopped, the soldiers would search for anything that was remotely “compromising” to find an excuse to detain you. So we felt that we needed to do something more practical than demonstrating on the streets and tried to bring comfort to the imprisoned students. We designed an incredible project to support the many students who had become political prisoners. We collected funds and food weekly. Every Wednesday, we visited our fellow students in prison. While the psychology students offered counselling to the prisoners, the law students took on their legal cases. It was a comprehensive project. Ironically, these weekly experiences in the prisons would later help me to survive my own confinement. During our conversations, the student political prisoners informed us about how to withstand the torture techniques and how to channel the emotional strength to endure. Their tips eventually saved my life.

FROM PROTEST TO ARREST

On the day of my capture, after teaching in the morning, I had gone to the university to attend a meeting with the student body. Upon my arrival, I was informed that four members of FENASTRAS, the national federation of Salvadoran workers¹ had been killed by the military. Our student association was very closely affiliated with this union which coordinated many projects in the communities. Our role was to provide education and training. FENASTRAS was a very strong, solid and organized umbrella union supported by Canadian and Swedish unions. FENASTRAS was organizing a demonstration that day on short notice in an effort to denounce the killings of its members and that of the female leader of a teachers’ union whose body was found raped, tortured, burned with acid and dismembered. I immediately felt a moral obligation to support the protest so we cancelled the meeting and I tried to recruit other students in the classrooms to join us. Only five of us went, including two of my closest friends and my mentor, a former president of the Education Students’ Association.

We arrived late at the street demonstration so we joined halfway through the march. The atmosphere was very tense. The demonstrators were very angry over the murders and were very determined to denounce the atrocities. The army followed the procession with very aggressive military vehicles and a large amount of uniformed soldiers. I was very scared because I knew that since the army had just killed the unionists, they were capable of anything. As we neared the end of the demonstration route, we noticed that the army had blocked the way to the FENASTRAS headquarters, a large impressive building constructed with Canadian and Swedish union funds. It was painfully frustrating to see that the

headquarters was in sight but it was completely unreachable. It quickly became obvious that there was nowhere to escape because the army had blocked all the streets. We were surrounded. The army started to push the crowd back and then attacked the people with batons, tear gas and plastic bullets. The demonstration disbanded. We were advised to remain calm and maintain our group to protect us against individual captures, however I could see that one of the students who had joined us panicked and ran away from the group. We learned later that he escaped. Many other *compañeros* were resisting at the back of the demonstration to allow the others to escape. Weapons were being fired, it was incredibly chaotic.

We then ran down a street and after two blocks, we entered a church along with some others and closed the doors. The parishioners were praying. We explained what happened and they said we could stay; they continued praying and singing. But I knew that we were not safe. People, including nuns and priests, had been killed in churches before. There were no sacred places with the army. We waited, petrified the whole time. In the meantime, the army blocked all the streets and closed everything in that very busy section of the city. When it got dark, they cut the electricity. I was very frightened. I had no experience in the movement, I was just a student. The unionists had experience with protests and police repression. For me, it was just insane. I started to realize that I would be paying dearly for having a conscience.

At what seemed to be around 10:00 p.m., the army used loud speakers to tell us to leave the church. We were not prepared to surrender because we could not trust them. We secured the doors even more. Then they threw tear gas grenades through the windows and started hitting the door really loudly. They started firing weapons for intimidation. The tear gas was horrible. I had felt it before but never in an enclosed area. I felt panicked by the asphyxiating effect. The army then entered the church in the dark. We were ready to resist in groups; we had positioned ourselves to be ready and had set the parishioners on one side for their safety. But they started hitting and firing at everyone at random. Even the elderly women who were praying were beaten barbarically. I could hear the women crying. The soldiers were attacking like animals. Then they distinguished the demonstrators from the parishioners and used full force against us. Initially we had grabbed things to protect ourselves but we had no choice but to surrender against such brutal force.

We were dragged out and lined up. I was fourth in line and my friend Danilo² was at the front of the line-up. He was hit in the head with the butt of a rifle and he fell to the ground immediately, bleeding profusely.³ There were so many blows. I was dragged by my hair while others were hitting me with batons and rifles. Others were kicking me endlessly. I was

left half on the sidewalk, half on the road. Then with the tip of a rifle, a soldier hit me in the testicles. It was a terrible blow; everything turned black and I could not breathe. I laid there being constantly hit for a long time.

After about a half an hour of barbaric beatings, swearing and diminishing verbal abuse, they started loading us onto a bus. From far away, I could see flashes of cameras. FENASTRAS had obviously mobilized the media. Its fearless female leader, Febe Velasquez, would do what she could to vindicate the union's image. When they put me on the bus, I was beaten on the way up the stairs. I felt a terrible blow from the butt of a rifle on my back ribs. The pain was excruciating, I fell immediately. For many years after, I have suffered strong pain in that area of my back from that one unforgettable blow. I struggled to grab the seat and pick myself up to get on the bus. I was kicked again. That was just the beginning of my ordeal. As our bus entered a military check point, there were flashing cameras from the media and the journalists said very loudly "FENASTRAS TALK!"

INTERROGATION AND TORTURE

We were taken to the police headquarters and one by one, we were blindfolded. Once I was blindfolded, I focused on the advice of the student prisoners. I knew I had to be careful about what I said and did. Then the hard part began. As I was lead up and down a ramp, I could hear the terrifying screaming of people in horrible pain, pain that could not be endured. At the bottom of the ramp, I was lead around a curve and then further down into a room. Then the interrogation started. The agony was endless. We were grabbed and beaten constantly. I received blows for no reason. I was already so tired from the stress of the demonstration and the beatings during the capture that I had little energy left, much less to withstand unbearable pain. Right away, the soldier grabbed me by my hair and yelled "You son of a bitch, you are going to tell me everything. I know you are from the fucking national resistance⁴ and we've been waiting for you. We're glad to see you – tell me everything now!" He started asking what I was doing. From the visits with the fellow student prisoners, I knew that in order to avoid spending years in jail, I should try to resist as much as I could. They had advised us on what to say and what not to say. They cautioned that once you give them something, they will continue relentlessly. Also within the student association, we had addressed the theme of state repression; we had prepared ourselves. My previous solidarity visits to prison helped me a lot. But regardless, I did not have much information to give. I was a school teacher and a

university student, not a militant. As a new student president, I had very little political experience.

The first interrogator accused me of many things including being part of a cell; he claimed he had pictures and videos of me. I knew that whatever I said I had to keep to the same story because they would try to break me with different interrogators and if I varied the story from one interrogator to another, it could be fatal. During the questioning, I was hit in the chest, stomach and testicles. I was grabbed by the hair all the time, but I was never beaten in the face. I told the inquisitor that I was a student of education and that I was only at the demonstration that day because another student had invited me to join an activity to raise awareness so I accepted but I did not know it was going to turn into a protest. He then grabbed my head and smashed it into the table forcefully and called me a “fucking liar”, stating that they had proof that I was in one of the videos burning a bus and that I had to tell him the truth or they would kill me. At that point, I remember hearing screaming by other people being tortured. I was interrogated for about half an hour. Then he left.

Afterwards, I was brought to a room with more people; I could hear others being interrogated around me. Then the second interrogator came in and pulled aggressively on my shirt, grabbed me by the hair and moved me to another desk where he accused me of being part of an armed group and wanted to know where the weapons were. He said “you son of a bitch, you are going to tell me where the weapons are, we know you are the one hiding the weapons”. I had never used weapons in my life. My political work was social and humanitarian. I went over the same account. At this point, I was really fearful and I was extremely tired but I stuck to my story. He told me to describe the guy who invited me to join the protest. I told him he was tall and skinny with brown hair. He tried to confuse me by saying that I had told the other interrogator that the recruiter was from FENASTRAS but I did not want to be implicated as part of the union; it would have certainly been fatal.

In the morning of the second day, I was really thirsty and I asked for a drink. The response was a blow to my chest. I was then faced with a third interrogator who was the “soft” one. He was playing psychological games and I think that he thought he was playing with me but I had been prepared. While I did not have the experience of other political activists, I knew enough to avoid being manipulated and to withstand the blows. I kept remembering the advice of the student prisoners that I had supported: “take as much punishment as you can because you don’t want to be here very long”. In some ways, I felt that this approach worked against me in the short term because I was badly beaten. My body was severely bruised everywhere. But in the end, the tactic saved my life.

Nevertheless, the second day was really bad both physically and psychologically. Early on that day, they brought me to walk up the ramps. Then they put me against a post and told me to sit. I was relieved because I had not had much of a chance to sit or rest since my capture. I thought they were being nice. With my hands cuffed behind me, I rested down with my back against the post. Then in came two very tough female soldiers. Together they interrogated and beat me continuously. They kicked me constantly with their boots. They told me they were going to show me the video of me burning the bus but when I denied my involvement, they kicked me in the stomach and chest. At one point, I raised my knee to make myself more comfortable but the women thought I was resisting them so they beat me more until they knocked me over on one side. One of them stepped harshly on my throat. I could not breathe and I choked. The abuse by the women was one of the hardest times of my detention. They would beat me both at the same time in places like the ribs, chest and stomach which made it extremely hard to breathe. It was very degrading. The beatings from the female soldiers were the harshest and longest.

I was moved to another room and set standing beside somebody. We stood there for a very long time. It was quiet and nobody spoke or moved. But all of a sudden, the guy beside me started to whisper to me. It was Guillermo's⁵ voice. He knew that I was in really bad shape and he was worried about me. He asked if I was okay. I did not want to answer because I thought it was stupid of him to talk to me but I understood that he was truly concerned and lacked the preparation I had. I quickly told him that I did not know who he was and to stop talking to me. But we both knew who we were standing beside and it was momentarily comforting. We confirmed this conversation upon our release. Ironically, I had been worried about him. When I heard the beatings he was getting during interrogation, I was really scared for him. His screams and cries were one of the scariest things I remember during those days.

After that, they took me into another room where they were interrogating a woman who was fairly young. From what I gathered, she was one of the very active women in the unions. She was completely subjugated; she was yelling and crying; she was really broken down. She begged the soldier to stop hurting her because she could no longer stand the pain. She even offered that he could do "something else" with her, if it would stop her suffering. Hearing her pleas was devastating. I felt powerless and wished I could have protected and saved her. Then I heard noises that sounded like aggressive sexual fondling. I felt horrible for how degrading and painful it was for her. He then grabbed her quickly from the room and took her away. As they were leaving the room, I felt

her barefoot step on one of my feet. Because I was blindfolded, I could not see her, but her foot, just like Guillermo's voice in the other room, reminded me that we were still human and alive. When we were released later, this young woman confirmed that she had been raped.

Toward the end of that second exhausting day, while sitting in a corner of a room, I was suddenly and shockingly attacked with a "capucha". They put a bag over my head and choked me. It was horrifying. Panic and suffocation paralyzed me. I felt like I was dying. I passed out. When I woke up, somebody grabbed me again by the hair and started to beat me. The beatings were non-stop; the blows to my groin area were also frequent and debilitating throughout my ordeal. On the third day, they started to manipulate me with my wife and children. In particular, I remember them taunting about what they were going to do with my wife because she was so pretty. They threatened to take away my children. I had been captured three days after my daughter was born and my son was a year old. They used the young age of my daughter against me, questioning why I was involved in political things when she had just been born. The truth was that the day of my capture started off as a routine work and school day. I had been responsible to my family in that way. I had not anticipated the turn of events related to the state repression and subsequent protest as I was not a militant. But they tried to use guilt against me. The threats against my family were devastating. I felt angry and desperate. I was close to breaking; it was one of the most painful torture techniques. I felt paralyzed by the nightmare of not knowing if my family was safe. I was never able to shake off the worry about them. The third day was full of psychological pressure. But my story remained coherent: I was a teacher who worked for the government and I was a university student of education. I never deviated from that account. But I also never told them that I was a student leader; withholding that detail saved my life while I was being detained, but it would later put me at great risk after my release. We had been threatened that if we lied to them, they would kill us.

On the fourth day, I went to court. My lawyer was the President of the Institute of Human Rights from the Department of Law at my university. He was part of the support team that students had created to assist victims of human right abuses. But he had been captured, detained and tortured by the authorities before and he had been warned that his life would be in danger if he ever showed up in court again. He disregarded this threat and showed up to take our cases. He was a brilliant man who was risking his life for our sake. In the meantime, in court he insisted that my blackened body be examined by a doctor. It was, but only as a routine procedure; I was never given any medicine for my recovery. My time in

court seemed only useful in justifying my detention because according to the law, the authorities could not detain people without reason. So my brief trial served to document the state's alleged grounds against me. I was forced to sign a false confession that included charges of burning a bus, weapons, explosives, subversion and working with the FMLN.

IMPRISONMENT

My first day in prison was terrifying. When I entered, I felt lost, disconnected and overwhelmed. I was never a violent person and the prison culture was foreign to me. I was a husband, father, teacher, student, musician and a government employee with a good salary. I had had the comforts of a protective apparatus. I was now locked in another world among El Salvador's toughest 'criminals' in a maximum security prison. While I was no longer tortured or beaten in prison, the psychological warfare was crippling. The guards ensured that you knew you were under their domain. But what scared me the most was the fear of being killed by other prisoners, some of whom were informants of the army. During the day, I felt safer among the political prisoners who stuck together; we were organized, disciplined and punctual planners who protected each other everywhere. For our safety, we ate together and went to the bathroom together. We never left each other unaccompanied or unprotected in the common areas. It was the resourceful and respected political prisoners who got me a thin mattress on my second night to help let my broken, bruised and throbbing body rest above the cold cement slabs we had as beds. I was the most visibly beaten political prisoner at the time. The solidarity among the political prisoners was comforting and strengthening.

My deepest fears though came at night. I was afraid of both prisoners and soldiers. I was petrified of being stabbed by my cellmates. But they were not the only predators I feared. We could be taken at any time by the soldiers who moved political prisoners randomly at night as an intimidation tactic. Since they would only grab one person at a time, we felt so vulnerable in isolation knowing that anything could happen and no one would ever know in the darkness of the night. I was moved four times this way and each time, I re-lived the barbaric interrogation days again.

What I recall most about the daily routine of prison life and what was the most damaging for me, beyond the fear of the horrifying bloody violence, was the degradation and humiliation. In the tiny, hell-hot and grossly overcrowded cells, we ate, slept and shit in the same confined area. While we did not spend 24 hours in our cells, the hygienic problems

were stifling. Also, our daily portion of beans was topped with the white powder apparently intended to control our testosterone.

Nevertheless, what I observed on a daily basis was our common humanity. While I was inside Mariona, one of El Salvador's worst prisons, I realized that we, both 'politicals' and 'criminals', were all human and all abandoned and deceived by our state and society to varying degrees. It was our common humanity and my own experience inside that reminded me of the desperate need for support programs within the jails. My penchant for education remained intact both despite and as a result of the chaos around me.

FREEDOM AND FEAR

I was released after a month at the penitentiary. As I walked out of the prison, I was greeted by family and friends, including Febe Velasquez, the FENASTRAS leader. But the sight I remember most and which brings me to tears now as I recall it, was the image of my wife standing there waiting for me. It remains a fresh and clear memory to this day. I remember exactly how she looked and the two-piece yellow outfit she was wearing. Seeing her then and there remains one of the greatest moments of my life.

My lawyer fled to Guatemala immediately after my release. He had taken care of all the paperwork to secure my freedom. I was lucky because most prisoners in Latin American jails are there for countless years without ever seeing their lawyers. Helping me put his life in greater danger. He now lives in Canada and works as a social worker. Febe was killed a few weeks after my release. She, along with dozens of other unionists and activists, including the young woman whose sexual abuse I had to witness in prison, died when the Salvadoran army blew up the FENASTRAS headquarters. Febe's state-orchestrated murder was a particularly significant loss which drew global attention by organizations like Amnesty International. She was a strong, fearless, charismatic, inspirational, genuine and active union leader. She was respected and valued everywhere by everyone. She was a particularly impressive role model for women.

In the days following my release, I reunited with my family and returned to work. Ironically, my salary came from the same state that had detained and tortured me. My grandmother found my scars and bruises very troubling. She had mixed feelings about my situation. While she was angry about the risks of my political involvement, she still cherished me as the gentle, respectful and loving grandson she had always been proud of.

Three weeks after my release, the “authorities” returned for me. I had been proud of my tenacity during my detention which seemed to have fooled them. But they had obviously discovered my identity as a student leader. It was an ultimate insult for which they sought revenge: more severe torture and certain death. The threat made against me that if I lied, they would kill me was being carried out. They had come to apprehend me at school one morning but I had an exam at the university that day and I had obtained permission to leave earlier, so I was not there. What fate! They interrogated the principal. Two brave female teachers immediately informed my wife, who, along with our children, went straight to the university to warn me. We have never returned to our home since that day. I was told by my neighbours and a sister who lived in our barrio that a driver and two guys sat in a 4x4 tinted window truck for a week outside our home.

Our lives fell completely apart. We lost our home, our jobs, our families and friends. We were on the run constantly to protect ourselves and our relatives and friends who hid us. For my wife and children’s safety, I fled to Guatemala in November 1989 and I did not return to El Salvador until many years later. My decision to flee was not an easy one. I struggled between my family’s safety and my loyalty to human rights activism. Although profoundly frustrating, the state’s repression had made my two greatest passions incompatible. As a last resort to stay in El Salvador, I considered an offer of “safety” of rebel life in the mountains. I was not a violent man but I never wanted to leave El Salvador, my home. It was a profound struggle. But the final decision to leave was made based on the guidance of my one year old son. One morning, I was sitting on the edge of the bed, trying to decide what to do; I was even asking God, “what do I do?” At that moment, my little son walked in from the living room. He put his hands on my lap and then hugged me. That was my breaking point. I made my decision in that moment and I left immediately. A tiny human being showed me the way.

In Guatemala, I was at least in Central America and close to home but it was heartbreaking to be away from my wife and children. I worked there for about eight months with the Carmelita Sisters as part of a UNICEF project educating street kids in the capital. Despite having relative safety and a job, I suffered from what I now understand to be symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. I was haunted by my ordeal. My body was so fragile. I had frequent black outs. I would lose consciousness and pass out without warning. Friends and co-workers were very concerned. But these symptoms disappeared once I was reunited with my family who eventually came to live with me. Prior to their arrival, my own mother who was living the United States had offered me passage to the U.S.

through a coyote.⁶ I had a lot of pressure from my mother and siblings to accept the offer. It was tempting, but I could not leave my wife and children behind. Some of my inner peace was restored when we were all back together. I no longer had blackouts.

BEYOND IMMIGRATION AND HUMILIATION THROUGH THE GIFTS OF SUPPORT AND SOLIDARITY

My family moved to Canada in August 1990. I had never intended to leave El Salvador, our home. But having my family all together and safe in Canada was our main priority and it meant so much. Despite the generous help we received to resettle, the move came with great losses. Within the first year, both my mother and grandmother died. It was extremely difficult emotionally and I resented that the repressive Salvadoran state had deprived me of precious family moments.

The early years came with other challenges. My first job was as a cleaner. I later worked in the food industry as the executive chef of a Canadian university. While I was grateful for the means to care for my family, I was a teacher. I had graduated from the best teachers' school in El Salvador. My fondest memories were of teaching and it was the profession I had taken to heart. I had also been very well respected as a teacher in the communities where I taught. But cleaning and cooking were not the issues. I knew that I had to do that for my family. So it was not about what I was doing; it was about how I was treated.

Other long term degradation came with the racist comments and belittling attitudes of supervisors, co-workers and clients. Other issues like lack of raises or differential treatment compared to Canadian-born co-workers angered me. These types of things were damaging and diminishing, and made me sometimes feel worthless. The patronizing comments about how we should feel thankful for being in Canada were also frustrating. I am and always will be grateful for our refuge in Canada. But no one can deny the extent of the losses that we suffered both personally and professionally. Our right to grieve those losses does not erase our gratitude. But I have learned to restore my own dignity knowing that I was a cherished and respected husband, father, grandson and teacher.

In addition to the challenges of adjusting to new life in Canada, the huge scars of torture left me vulnerable. It still haunts me. The flashbacks and nightmares remain, although now with less intensity. One of the greatest changes I experienced was in my demeanour. Prior to my detention, I was known as a gentle and thoughtful person, characteristics that made me a favoured grandson and nephew, as well as a cherished

friend to many. The torture changed me. I was a very different person afterwards. I became angry, ugly and explosive. These characteristics surfaced more in Canada. In El Salvador and Guatemala, we were still living in such war-based turmoil that my emotions did not have time to settle. But in Canada, my wife was no longer living with the same person she had married and she suffered tremendously as a result. My wife was imprisoned as much by torture as I was. But she had had no part of my activism. I felt guilty for submitting her to all of the suffering; she too had lost her family and career because of my detention. Yet through all of my blown fuses, she patiently supported me, cared lovingly for our trauma-affected children, and allowed me to make and live with my own decisions. She is a source of strength and I owe her for being such a solid pillar. I also owe my children, especially my eldest son, who were also victimized by the after-effects of my torture and detention. I am thankful for their resilience because there is only so much guilt that a father can hold about how his own brokenness affects his family.

Humiliation was probably one of my greatest post-torture struggles and it fuelled my anger for two reasons. First, I was humiliated by the degradation and powerlessness I felt during my detention and torture. I was ashamed of the resulting broken and dysfunctional state I was in. I was resentful of how the government's abuse had debased, disempowered and disgraced me – it had shaken my dignity. The second humiliation that I experienced was my own sense of betrayal against the friends that I felt I had abandoned when I left El Salvador. For such a long time, I felt like a traitor. I have deep regards for friendship and solidarity; once one establishes a link of solidarity, it becomes sacred and it is something that you honour. I had become very sensitive to these commitments in my human rights work at the university that had addressed such deep human suffering. I felt that there were some boundaries that should never be crossed. So I struggled for years with guilt because I thought I had let my “*compañeros*” down by leaving El Salvador. I had especially left them behind in the worst and roughest time. I felt responsible for my friends who died during the conflicts when I was not there to help. I also had left family unprotected in El Salvador; my wife later told me that during the final military offensive in 1989, a bullet struck the wall just above the heads of our two sleeping babies. I was shocked upon hearing this. I resented that my political imprisonment had deprived me of being present to protect my family and to defend human rights at a key historical time in my country. I had been completely restless in Guatemala knowing that I could not do anything to help because the border was closed during the final offensive. The attacks of guilt were the worst then.

My healing and release from these imprisoning feelings came from

the very friends whom I feared had resented me. Once the country had stabilized after the peace accords were signed (1992) and a democratic election was held (1994), I returned to El Salvador in December 1996 to face my demons. I was still scared, devastated and ashamed about abandoning my political responsibilities. But my friends were extremely generous and non-judgmental when they welcomed me home. I credit them with helping me get out of my slump. They held a dinner reception for me and each of my university friends expressed one positive thing about me. I felt deeply touched and honoured. I found it remarkable what human beings can do for each other. There I found forgiveness, healing and peace. I returned to Canada a different person and their precious gift helped me to move to a different stage of recovery and life. It was that same bond of solidarity with my *compañeros* that I thought I had broken, albeit understandably due to brutal state repression, that had actually restored me closer to health and happiness.

But the impact of torture and political imprisonment is still very present even after twenty years. It has affected my perception and experience with law enforcement authorities and facilities. Before I explain recent flashbacks, I recount a related incident with Canadian police twenty years ago. Very shortly after I came to Canada, I started to work as a cleaner on a night shift. One night, as I finished at midnight, I missed my bus. I knew neither English nor the area but I started to walk to find my way home. As I walked along the street, I was picked up by a police officer for no reason. I had been told that Canadian police were friendly. But this cop was less than polite to say the least. He drove off with me in the back of the cruiser and I became completely paranoid remembering what I had undergone with police in El Salvador. Luckily, the cop dropped me off at a gas station but without providing any other assistance. While seemingly a minor incident, the paranoia from the torture had left me feeling very vulnerable.

More recently in 2009, I experienced flashbacks and vulnerability again because of the law enforcement personnel, prison cells and courts that I have encountered in my community placement as a social work student. In one of the counselling series of a drug treatment program that I lead, one of the participants was a police officer. Despite the fact that I was the group facilitator and therefore supposedly in control of the situation, his presence made me extremely uncomfortable. I struggled not only with the fact that he was part of the “law”, but his arrogant mentality was also difficult to bear. I had to work hard to cope with my issues and it took a while before I felt comfortable with the cop in the group.

Similarly, in my placement with a drug court, I was entrusted to escort prisoners to and from their cells. But I soon learned that the feelings of

paranoia have not disappeared. The first time and each time, I went to get a prisoner from the holding cells, I felt cold and my heart would pound. I immediately connected to my own experience of imprisonment and I felt very nervous. I had flashbacks of the horrible images of prison life. I have avoided going to the local detention centre within my placement because I am not ready to re-enter a prison. I do not want a traumatic reaction to screw up my placement and employment. I still need to work through a lot of issues. It is still difficult to detach, even twenty years later. But I am determined to persevere because of the common humanity that I see among prisoners and non-prisoners. I have also found comfort in my academic work where I have discovered the humanistic counselling approach of Carl Rogers that is client-centered, unconditional and supportive, and from which I have learned to break down boundaries and to allow my much needed healing.

RECONSIDERING JUSTICE

Although I know what happened to me was a gross violation of my human rights, I never had a strong desire to pursue a formal justice process in my case through court. While a part of me has always wanted some level of acknowledgement and accountability for what was done to me, my immediate and long term concern was taking care of my family's safety and keeping us away from further risk of fatal repression. I also never saw my own personal case with the relevance that I probably should have. Instead, I saw mine as one of thousands; my situation was neither unique nor extraordinary. Perhaps I have underestimated my own experience and its impact, but so many other human rights violations in the context of torture were so monstrous compared to my ordeal. Horrible, horrible things have happened to people I know in El Salvador and elsewhere. So many families and especially mothers have suffered so much during the war in El Salvador. I thus want justice not so much for myself but for all.

Justice for me in this sense means acknowledgement, but one that addresses the collective violations of human rights. We cannot effectively move towards a different political scene in El Salvador without addressing the past. Political and social institutions will only go in a different direction if they mature and strengthen by admitting the past and providing the necessary opportunities for all to heal. In this way, the truth must be told not only through formal apologies by the government but in school books and classrooms. The struggle for justice, especially criminal justice against perpetrators of torture in countries where dictatorial or military right wing governments have been installed for a long time is a very risky

business for new democratic forces emerging. Unless there is a basis to sustain the country to move ahead, it is almost political suicide. Bringing torturers to justice will likely never happen fully or fairly. So the most realistic option would be to get as close to acknowledgement as possible. In a broad sense, history must be told. The images of the mothers of the disappeared⁷ and of the fearless leaders like Febe Velasquez have to be vindicated, and that would be the ultimate expression of justice within our possibilities. I still have fresh memories from childhood of decapitated people on the street and of the courageous mothers who went to protest and ask for their disappeared children. These women need to be recognized. They must be known and we must know them. Their stories must be part of the conscience of the country; these women stood up in the darkest times of our history; they are the ultimate expression of justice.

As a victim of these ordeals, in the long run what would bring me peace and justice is if I do something that brings comfort to myself and others. These matters do not have borders. When we experience this trauma, we are cut off from the normal course of life and interrupted from what we know. Restoring ourselves is a life-long process. I personally need something that will link me to my past in a constructive way. My anger and resentment over what my government took away from me through imprisonment has moved me closer to a more human sensitivity towards injustices. When I graduate as a social worker, I plan to assist in social justice and development projects that bring witness to what is happening. For me the concept of justice that I can relate to is fighting for change and that always gives me hope, and hope for progress can never be lost.

CONCLUSION

I was captured, detained and tortured twenty years ago. This reflection in 2009 is the first time I have revealed any details of my ordeal to anyone, not even to my wife, children, political comrades or other fellow torture survivors and never to a counsellor. This revelation was never on my agenda. I had buried my suffering deep within out of survival. I have shared this experience hesitantly, cautiously and partially. But I hope that my reflection on my ordeal as a political prisoner and torture survivor has shown the complex realities of the plight of imprisoned people who, on the one hand are rendered so vulnerable by such structurally powerful repressive states, and yet on the other hand, have unbreakable spirits to survive and overcome, both personally and in solidarity with others. Our collective endurance and our shared justice are found in the hopeful message that “the people united will never be defeated”.⁸

ENDNOTES

- ¹ FENASTRAS: Federación Nacional de Trabajadores Salvadoreños.
- ² Pseudonym to protect his identity.
- ³ His bloody condition saved his life. We learned later that he was brought to a hospital and released.
- ⁴ The soldier referred to a militant organization.
- ⁵ Pseudonym to protect his identity.
- ⁶ Coyote refers to someone who smuggles illegal immigrants most often from Central America to the United States.
- ⁷ The mothers of El Salvador founded COMADRES, to help address the disappearances of their children and other human rights violations during the civil war in El Salvador.
- ⁸ This expression is a translation of the revolutionary song “El Pueblo Unido Jamás Sera Vencido”.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrian López was born in the village of Olocuilta, El Salvador in 1965. He graduated from the Normal School of Teachers Ciudad Normal “Alberto Masferrer” at the age of 21. While studying education at the National University of El Salvador, he became involved with the struggle against human rights abuses during the worst years of the country’s armed conflict in 1987. As a student leader of the Department of Education, he became a political activist and the President of the Student Association for the Faculty of Sciences and Humanities. After being tortured and imprisoned, he fled the persecution of the repressive Salvadoran regime to seek political exile in Guatemala. While living in Guatemala, he worked as a teacher and social worker with street children through a UNICEF sponsored outreach program. He immigrated to Canada with his wife and children in 1990. He holds a Canadian college diploma in Social Work and is currently in his fourth year of a Bachelor degree in Social Work at a Canadian university.

With My Child In Jail *

Saeideh

I come from an extended family in a small city in Iran. My family was very poor, but culturally and politically rich. My father was an old man, extremely wise and knowledgeable. He was illiterate but well aware of what was happening in the world. From childhood I became socially aware, particularly about women's oppression, especially when I looked at the lives of my older sisters, who were suffering in unsuccessful marriages.

In the course of growing up, I developed an aspiration to work for the emancipation of humankind, specifically from poverty and patriarchal oppression. Soon I found myself in a circle of likeminded women. We used to visit different groups of women and young girls to discuss with them their lives and the state of their society.

While Iranian society went through political turmoil and a full-fledged revolutionary movement in 1978, we intensified our activities in our city and soon we became a small, active group, well known to everybody. When the oppression came it not only affected me but it affected my entire family. The Guardians of Revolution started invading houses and arresting on a massive scale. They stopped suspected political activists in the streets and killed them on the spot. They used their techniques of terror and intimidation. Many of my family members escaped and lived underground while the rest were harassed on a continuous basis. I escaped to the capital of my province.

During these years of living in the capital, I developed a friendship with a gentleman who was politically active and well respected in the community. Eventually we married. We loved each other and cherished the hope that by furthering our human rights activities we would establish a fruitful and affectionate family life. We lived together for only fifteen months and the fruit of this relationship was a baby boy. Everything seemed to be going well. We had a warm house, a handsome baby and hope for a bright future.

Our house was invaded on a cold, dark winter night in late 1982. Around 4:30 a.m. I awoke to the cry of my baby. He was hungry and I began breastfeeding him. Suddenly the silence was broken with the horrible sound of boots in the hall and on the roof. The door was kicked open by *pasdars* (paramilitary guards). Everybody was asleep except for me and my baby. A *pasdar* took a veil from a hanger, threw it over me and ordered: "Wear this! Get up! Stand in front of the wall!"

They then awoke my husband by kicking him with their boots. They sent us to different corners of the room, and began conducting body

searches. A group of *pasdars* searched our closets and the rest of the room. They called my husband by his organizational nickname. This was how we came to know that somebody had betrayed us.

All of the guards were armed. They blindfolded us and did not even allow me to change my baby's diaper. We were guided outside. I looked through the blindfold to see a blind alley, a cul-de-sac with many cars and several armed *pasdars*. I saw a person blindfolded getting out of a car. I recognized him by his stature; he was the person who had betrayed us and had guided the guards to our home. They forced us into a car. At this point my husband told me: "We have reached the end of the line. Forgive me if I ever did anything bad to you". I responded with affection, comforting him and saying that he had provided me a sweet and pleasant life, and that there was no need for forgiveness. The *pasdars* separated us immediately and took him to another car. I would not see my husband again for a long time.

We were separated in jail; they threw me in a small, dirty cell with no heating system. There was a blanket stained with blood, urine and dried excrement. I even saw parts of a human body there. The walls of the cell were stained with blood and the handwriting of ex-prisoners. Some of them highlighted the need for courage, fortitude and resistance.

It was not long before they took me for interrogation. I had to take my child with me. They began by stating that if I did not provide them with the necessary information they would kill me. The interrogator began looking over the file he had received about me from my home town. I saw a paper about my elder brother. He was a teacher of philosophy in a high school. The paper was a petition signed by the school principal and many others proclaiming my brother to be an infidel. They had testified that my brother had called Imam Hossein – the third Imam of the Shia sect of Islam who is considered the martyr of all martyrs – a reactionary person. I knew that this could lead to my brother's execution and I was in a state of shock. At that moment someone called the interrogator on his walkie-talkie. The interrogator put down the file to move to the other side of the room in order to answer the person on the line. It was a rare opportunity. I grabbed the paper from the file and in a moment I chewed and swallowed it.

The interrogator resumed his work.

The blindfold played a big role in his interrogation. He used to put it on and then take it off. Although my child was only four months old, whenever they put the blindfold over my eyes he started to cry. They would tie my hands and feet to the bar of a stretcher beating the soles of my feet and sometimes my back. This was all done while my baby was left in the corner of the torture chamber on the bare, dirty floor. My son

would cry as they tortured me. Initially I tried to tolerate the pain and not scream. I was tortured by two people who quickly became furious with my resistance. One of the torturers told his friend, "You aren't beating her hard enough; if you beat her harder you will have a greater reward from God Almighty".

I pleaded with them to take the baby outside of the room. They then started to insult me, beating me harder and threatening:

The baby is not yours; it belongs to the Islamic Republic of Iran.
If you don't give us information we will take the baby from you forever. These days are the best days of your life. We know what to do with you next.

When one of the torturers got tired he would hand his whip to the other man, who, before starting, would bless his friend: "May God reward you for your holy work".

After delivering blows to the soles of my feet they would stop and call in a female *pasdar* who would force me to walk. The males were not supposed to touch me. Before the torture began, a female *pasdar* used to strip me down leaving only my underwear, removing even my bra. Then she covered me with linen bed sheets and started flogging me. Sometimes when they flogged my back the linen would tear. I used to faint after severe torture; they would then bring me back to consciousness by pouring very hot or very cold water over my body. Then they let me go back to the cell. I could barely pick up my child, but they forced me to do so. With injuries to many parts of my body, I used to carry my baby in my arms to my cell. They degraded me by making comments about not adhering to the dress codes of the Islamic Republic: "Be careful! Your veil has slipped from your head! You should be ashamed of yourself".

I was alone with my four-month-old baby and did not know what they were doing to my husband. They put me through all kinds of torture, degrading treatment and punishment in an attempt to extract information about my husband and his activities. My worst experience was when they tortured my husband in a neighbouring cell so that I could hear his screams. They mentioned my name and insulted me, threatening to rape and kill me if he did not confess. They brought him to such a point that during his screams he sounded like a dying beast. I was ready to be tortured ten times more to stop my husband's torture by those butchers of humankind.

Three days after my arrest, they took me to be interrogated again. They demanded that I provide them with all the information I had. I withstood their threats and insisted that I had no information whatsoever.

This made both of my interrogators furious. They tortured me to the point of death and then raped me, one after the other. Each offered my body to the other before their sordid action: “You go first”. “No, brother, please. You go first”. I cannot describe the details here, as it is too traumatic. Suffice it to say that I suffered from bleeding and menstruation problems for a long time afterwards.

I would like to mention here that the religious Puritanism of the interrogators was perversely hypocritical. It was un-Islamic for men to touch a woman. Female guards, were not supposed to touch us as we were leftist, non-believers, and therefore untouchable. It frequently happened that a male or female guard, with a stick in his or her hand, opened the cell door and asked me to put on the blindfold.

They asked us to hold one end of the stick and follow them while they held the other end. Their religious Puritanism did not allow them to hold the hand of prisoners whom they regarded as “belligerent to God and corrupted on earth”. In their torture chamber, however, there was no sign of piety. Male guards, assisted by their female colleagues, had no shame and did not spare women political prisoners from sexual abuse, rape or even gang rape. They legitimized their hateful crimes by reciting verses from the Qur’an or other religious texts: “You are non-believers; you cannot enjoy Islamic rules; we can do anything we like with infidels”.

Living with the baby in jail while resisting torture was not an easy task. I had no diapers, only two old ragged pieces of cloth. A stench permeated my cell. I could only go to the bathroom three times a day for the duration of twenty minutes. I had to very quickly wash the cloth I used as a diaper, the baby and myself in order to return to the cell on time. The baby had to wear his diapers, drenched with urine and stool, for hours. His skin was burning and covered with bruises. The wounds were bleeding. Anytime I knocked on the door, there was no answer. The guards hated to open our cell unless they were taking us to be tortured.

The food was poor and very soon, as a result of torture and poor nutrition, my breast milk dried up. I begged the guards for milk or powdered milk. They answered me with insults and beatings. They told me that there was a ration of food for one prisoner and that the baby was not counted as a prisoner. As an “incommunicado” prisoner, I was not allowed to ask my family to bring us food. I could not bear my baby’s starvation. I was left with no choice but to feed him my own meagre food. As it was too hard for the little baby, I chewed the food first, made it as soft as possible and put it into his mouth. But the food had no nutritional value. The baby was always hungry and so was I. This, along with the burning pain in his thighs and buttocks, made him restless. He cried all the time.

My darling child became so weak that I thought it would be difficult for him to survive. A male guard sympathized with me. There was a hole in the door with a flap that could only be opened from the outside. From time to time the guard used to open the flap and speak with me through the hole. "I am sorry that I cannot save you from this damned place, but at least I can bring milk and diapers for the baby". This was a glimpse of hope amidst the darkness. I thanked him and begged him to do it before it was too late. My hope turned to despair when he told me that he loved me and wanted sexual intercourse with me. Alas! He wanted to make a deal with me.

I rejected the deal and told him that an extra-marital relationship, specifically with a helpless captive mother, is considered an unforgivable sin according to his Islamic belief. I even threatened to bring the issue to the attention of his superiors. He backed off momentarily. However, he again tried to take advantage of me, when he saw my baby's deteriorating condition. Nothing is more painful for a mother than to see her child dying gradually before her eyes.

I was facing one of the most difficult dilemmas of my life. On the one hand, there was no doubt in my mind that I must not submit to his will. On the other hand, I found it selfish to reject the deal and to allow my child to die. I frequently challenged myself, "What's more important: your integrity or the life of your poor, innocent, starving child?" At last I decided to surrender, telling myself, "I have to save my child. They have already raped me. Let this be another torture on top of that".

I received small concessions. The guard brought me milk, diapers and cookies. However, he gradually discontinued his help on the pretext that it would enrage prison authorities. This intensified my hate tenfold. More than twenty-two years have passed since this incident in my life and I have not been able to forgive myself. I shared the story with my psychiatrist twenty years later and I am still under her care. She has assured me that I made the right decision. She might be correct, but I am not capable of overcoming my emotional obsession. I had a choice and could have rejected the dirty deal. The baby is now a young man. I have never told him the price I paid for his survival. What will his reaction be if he comes to know about it? Will he forgive me? These questions haunt my mind constantly.

Two months later, they transferred me to a new cell and I never saw the guard again. The cell had no window. I did not know whether it was day or night. I could only guess the time of day when they brought my food. We had not had a bath for a month and a half; both my child and I were stinking. One day a government delegation visited the jail. They entered my cell and asked if I had been tortured. "Don't you see my

injured feet?”, I asked. I also showed them the baby’s infected thighs, buttocks and armpits. I told them about my back that was injured as a result of being tortured and added: “Obviously, I can’t show you, because you would then subject me to the Law of *Taazir* (divine punishment) that would result in many more lashes”. According to the Law of *Taazir*, a woman was strictly forbidden to show any part of her body to a man (except her husband).

When my child was about six months old I noticed some sores on his head; he had long hair and I had not noticed them earlier. When I looked carefully I found many infected sores and worms coming out of the wounds. This was because of the lack of sanitation and the fact that we had not been allowed to wash for more than two months.

I used to miss my husband all the time, but I saw my husband only twice in jail. The first time was three months after our arrest. As a part of an inter-prison visiting program, they allowed me to see my husband behind a glass barrier for a few minutes. The second meeting happened by sheer chance in the course of a transfer.

It did not take long until they detected and arrested whoever was connected to us. In their terms I became “information depleted” and was no longer an interesting subject for interrogation. It was the right time for them to transfer me to the public jail and send me for trial. They told me:

We are now sending you to a new facility. It is upsetting that you didn’t collaborate with us. You must reform yourself, if not for your own sake, at least for the sake of this baby. We hope that you will feel pity for your child and behave yourself.

This time, instead of a blindfold, they put a cap on my head and pushed it down to cover my eyes. My body was stinking to the point that I could not even tolerate myself.

They pushed us into a car. After some time I found myself in the corridor of the police court. I could hear the voices of many other prisoners. They started exchanging information. Someone, who had seen my child in the torture chamber, recognized him, and informed me that my husband was among the prisoners. After some time, I heard a quiet voice: “Don’t talk; don’t trust anyone”. I recognized my husband’s voice. I felt great emotion. I was happy to know that he was still alive. I longed to see him and tell him that we too had survived all their tortures.

They took us to another room and permitted us to uncover our eyes. I pulled the cap away from my eyes and head and looked around. I recognized my husband.

His face was pale and he looked fatigued. He smiled and told me to remain calm and relaxed. He was taking advantage of every moment to see our six-month-old son. During the time we were together, he kept staring at the baby.

Unfortunately, living in the cells had created such a devastating impact on the child that he did not react well to anybody; he was afraid of the many seated men with beards and moustaches. The baby would not even look at his father. When I tried to persuade him to go to his father, he hid his face in my bosom. This meeting with my husband was too short. It was our second and last meeting since our arrest.

They separated us and transferred me, along with my baby, to a public ward that was run by the police. There, I encountered many prisoners including a few from my own town. They welcomed us with joy. But when they stepped forward to embrace us, they immediately stepped back due to the rotten smell coming from our bodies. We had to wait to shower until the next day.

There were thirty small cubicles in the showering area, each with one shower inside. The cubicles were dark and without any ventilation. They pushed three or more prisoners inside each cubicle to shower together. Twenty minutes after closing the gate of the shower site, we were expected to have finished everything. Altogether we had ten minutes to bathe. The water was either freezing-cold or boiling-hot. Sometimes, we had to stop with soap still on our bodies.

One day they took me for fingerprinting. Upon seeing my name the officer got confused. He asked me, with astonishment, why I was being fingerprinted twice. I assured him that it was my first fingerprinting. He checked his list carefully and accepted my explanation. "That was somebody else with the same surname". He mentioned the first name spontaneously. It was shocking news for me. My younger brother was among the prisoners.

We had to adapt ourselves to the new environment. Life would have been more miserable without the generous assistance of other prisoners. They used to help me with everything related to the baby – especially his clothing. There were four rooms in our ward, each with a total area of 24 square metres. Rooms were overcrowded, each with 100 prisoners. We could not sleep at the same time due to the lack of space. We had divided ourselves into three groups: sitting, standing and sleeping prisoners. In an attempt to get more space, we slept in reverse directions. To obtain extra space for babies, prisoners who were shorter slept in the same area. There were four other babies in jail with their mothers. No child could sleep with their mother due to the lack of space. The smell emanating from the babies' diapers was a source of annoyance for all prisoners. I wrapped

my baby's dirty diapers inside my own dresses to save other prisoners from the smell.

We had to sleep at 10:00 p.m. sharp. We were not allowed to feed the babies during sleeping hours. Babies were strictly forbidden from crying. If they did, the guards would punish their mothers severely. One night, the baby had diarrhea and I had to remain awake and change his diapers frequently. I used all possible precautions, but a guard noticed. She woke everyone up. I showed her the diapers and told her about the exceptional situation. She did not believe me and shouted: "You are lying to me. You are using this as an excuse to organize a nightly discussion circle. You are conspiring against Islam. Tomorrow I will tell the brothers (male guards) about your conspiracy". I could not control my anger. I showed her my baby's diapers and told her, "Then tell the brother guards that I used my baby's diapers as a tool of my conspiracy". She ordered me to shut up and left. The next day they called me for interrogation and gave me 60 lashes for my remarks.

I had to take the baby when they interrogated me. He was afraid of people. Sometimes they called me before 9:00 a.m. and returned us to the cell in the evening, during which time we had no food or water and were not permitted to go to the washroom. Interrogators were annoyed by the presence of my baby. Many times, they threatened that if I brought the baby again they would separate us forever. I could not comply with their orders because the child would not stay with anybody else.

With the passage of time, the baby became bigger. He soon started hating the blindfold. One day the torturers prolonged the interrogation to the extent that both of us fainted. They brought me back to consciousness and sent one of the jail mates to carry the baby to the ward.

Food was poor in terms of both quality and quantity. Prisoners had no food during the course of their interrogation. It happened many times that the baby was hungry for many hours when I was going through the ordeal of interrogation.

The baby eventually developed affection for my fellow prisoners. He enjoyed having many "aunties". When he was nine months old, he spoke all three languages spoken in the ward: Azari, Farsi and Kurdish. His "aunties" had taught him. It was interesting that he spoke with each "auntie" in her native tongue. If a Kurdish girl, for instance, tried to speak Farsi with him, he would respond in Kurdish. No one could play a trick upon him.

He was ten months old when he got an infection that blocked his urinary tract. He stopped urinating. It took a painful effort to convince the guards to take the child to the clinic in prison. The doctor, a political prisoner himself, prescribed an antibiotic ointment. He told me, in the

presence of two guards, that the ointment should be applied deep inside the child's penis; otherwise, he would die. He gave me a thin barometer and advised me to smear it with the ointment and insert it inside. It was a painful practice. He would lose consciousness during the process and I used to cry because I had no choice but to inflict pain on my child. All the other prisoners used to cry with me. The doctor told me that outside the jail doctors used anaesthesia prior to implementing this treatment.

The child's health was deteriorating. He was crying all the time and making life miserable for everyone in the ward. This prompted all my jail mates to write a joint petition to the jail authorities and request to have my child transferred to the hospital immediately. The authorities were reluctant to transfer him because I was in limbo and they usually did not transfer any prisoners to outside hospitals before their conviction. I pleaded with them for three days; my child was slowly dying. They finally transferred us, escorted with two *pasdars* and two policemen.

Upon arrival at the hospital's premises, I remained handcuffed and the guards escorted me until we reached the special ward in the hospital. They did not want to enter the actual hospital unit because they were afraid of people's reactions that were generally against prison guards. They left and stayed on guard outside. It was in the hospital ward that the police officers finally took off my handcuffs. They had been ordered to take us to the hospital in such a way that no one would know that we had come from jail. They behaved as if we were friends who needed help. Despite these attempts, the doctors and nurses immediately sensed that they had brought us from a political prison.

It was unbelievable! I could feel kind and compassionate glances everywhere. There was a high level of cooperation and collaboration among medical personnel to save my child. I received friendly messages both directly and indirectly from all corners. One of the doctors began having a friendly chat with the police officers in an attempt to distract their attention. In the meantime, another doctor took us inside a room and asked me about the conditions in jail. I informed him that I did not feel secure. He assured me that everybody in that ward was a friend.

They undressed my child and put new clothing on him. They then put the old clothing on top of the new in order to hide the new dress from the guards and police officers. They fed my baby with chocolate which he had never tasted before. They filled his pockets with chocolates to take with him. They attempted to prolong the process of treatment to give me some time to rest. The medical staff told me that they would prepare any type of food I liked. Their kindness was like refreshing water in a parched desert. These were people who did not know me. They were only driven by their altruism and good will. One of the nurses gave me one hundred

toomans, which was a lot of money. Since she knew that they would search me in the jail she hid the money inside the baby's diapers.

It did not take long for almost everyone in the ward to come to know about the helpless political prisoner and her little baby. I felt empathy from the many nurses and medical personnel who came and visited us; they pretended that they were there to check the baby. They gave us whatever they could gather, including everything they had in their own pockets. The staff did everything for the baby.

In an attempt to give us another day of rest and comfort the doctor made up an excuse, telling the guards and officers that he needed to take a blood sample from my child the following day before he had eaten his breakfast. He wrote a very persuasive letter to the authorities in jail and told them the child's health was in danger. After a few hours they took me back to my jail. The next day there was general reluctance from the guards and the jail manager to let us out. I also came to know from their conversation that the doctors had made frequent calls warning them about the health risks facing the baby. Finally, they let us go to the hospital.

When we reached the hospital I felt that I had been moved from hell to paradise. The abundance of food and drink gave me the feeling that we were invited to a banquet. They said, "This is all for you and your baby". They had brought many pairs of shoes and socks. It was not possible to take all of them back to the prison. I had to dress him in many pairs of socks, one on top of the other. They asked officers to wait outside and they took us to a nursing room – a place where no patient was permitted to enter. There, the most pleasant and unexpected event was waiting for me: I found a woman who was standing with her back to us. "Who is she?", I asked myself. The lady turned around. I could not believe my eyes. She was my sister-in-law, my husband's sister. She embraced me and started kissing her nephew. As a nurse in the hospital, her colleagues had informed her of our coming and had taken the risk of arranging a private visit between us. She gave us money and gifts. This visit did not last for more than a few minutes due to the life-threatening risk we were all taking.

They kept us there until late afternoon. Food and beverages were so attractive that everybody joined the banquet – even the police officers. The most delectable fruit on the table were grapes and watermelon. These were not allowed in jail due to the guards' suspicion that we might make wine from them.

The doctor asked me if I had experienced torture and unusual or degrading treatment. I politely apologized and told him that as a prisoner I was not able to speak about those issues. The doctor appreciated my honesty and told me: "But, I am sure something terrible has happened to you. Your baby is afraid of men, including myself".

A nurse brought the test result. I saw the doctor's hands shaking. He remained silent for a moment and in his silence started wiping away his tears: "I have bad news for you. The level of sugar in your baby's blood is extremely low; he should drink lots of fruit juice and eat things that are rich in protein". I told him that in jail there was no food quota for the baby. He wrote a letter to the doctor in jail and explained the life-threatening danger of low glucose in the baby's blood. It was with the help of that letter that the jail doctor was able to get fresh and canned fruits for the baby after that.

The guards hated to see us happy in jail even for a moment. Spontaneous manifestations of happiness such as singing, dancing and even tapping rhythms on the wall were strictly prohibited. The guards considered the actions un-Islamic and punished "perpetrators" with lashes. One day, along with two prisoners and my child, we decided to go to a room that was used both as a library and a place of worship. One of the girls started tapping on the door in a rhythmic manner. My baby started laughing and dancing with joy. A guard observed the scene and reported it. It did not take long before we were called by loudspeaker to report to the jail's office.

In our jail, guards used two different terms when they called a prisoner to report to the office: *Ezaam* (expedition) or *Edaam* (execution). Often, they purposefully pronounced "z" like "d" to create panic among the prisoners. Children hated these terms and anytime authorities called a prisoner to the office they stopped and pleaded with her not to go. They had instinctually come to know that those who go for *Edaam* (execution) would never return. The moment we heard the word "*Edaam*" from the loudspeaker, we were all electrified. A female guard was sent to take us to the office. On the way, my child started begging the guard to forgive us, repeatedly mentioning that it was his fault that he danced.

They hastened us to a room called "Chamber No. 15" where we found a man other than the interrogators who were known to us. He blamed us by saying: "Shame on you! You performed a wedding ceremony in a holy place of worship. You have ridiculed the sacred traditions of Islam". Both girls were terrified. In an attempt to boost their morale, I took a risk and responded angrily: "I have made frequent verbal and written requests in vain for food and clothes for my baby. Ignoring these requests has nothing to do with your Islamic tradition, but you find knocking on the door against the sacred traditions of Islam".

I paused for a moment and continued: "We have frequently asked authorities not to use the term *Ezaam*, that has the same sound as *Edaam* (execution), but no one has paid any attention. Don't you notice that this child is on the verge of having a stroke because he heard this word a few minutes earlier?" My words softened the heart of the man who lowered

his voice and said: "Go back to your jail. Whatever mistakes you have committed so far I forgive you. Don't do it again".

Children in prison used to show a great deal of empathy for tortured prisoners, but in their own ways. There was a girl in our room whose intestines had been twisted under torture. With the intensification of her pain she used to have convulsions and lose consciousness. At these times, we wrapped her in a blanket. Four prisoners held four sides of the blanket, and we delivered her to the guards to send her to the hospital.

One day her condition deteriorated and we all insisted that she be taken immediately to the jail's hospital. Amidst general anxiety, my child stopped everybody and told us in his childish language: "Don't take auntie to the hospital; I know what her problem is". For a moment all the weeping inmates stopped and turned back to my child:

"Tell us the problem with auntie?" He raised both his hands and said with great self-confidence: "She has urine and cannot urinate the way I couldn't urinate. Take her to the toilet". For a few seconds our weeping turned to laughter. It was astonishing that such a small baby had his own diagnosis and acted like an experienced doctor.

In an attempt to pass the time and make the tedious life of the prison tolerable, prisoners used the most elementary materials to make interesting handicrafts. The handmade crafts were so valued in our prison cell that we took the utmost care to keep them away from the children. We felt lucky that after a long time we had acquired needle and thread. We had got thread by pulling it out of our towels. We got needles from our families. They hid them inside fruits that they sent to us in jail. During visiting hours they gave us hints about which fruits had needles inside.

We used colourful thread to make art and do embroidery. A talented Kurdish girl made such a beautiful piece of embroidery that it brought a sense of pride to all of us. Everybody praised her work. The children were enthusiastic to see her work but they were not allowed to touch it.

One day prisoners were showing the Kurdish girl's embroidery to each other and exchanging words of praise. This made my child so enthusiastic and joyful that he went ahead with full confidence and in a plausible tone ordered in Kurdish: "Give way! Give way!" He took the embroidery and said, "I am tired of getting orders all the time not to touch. I want to touch. I want to see what it is". We tried to explain to him that preventing him from touching her work was necessary to protect his hands from the needle. "If you teach me how to stitch", he said, "I won't injure my hands".

There were so many mice in our jail that sometimes we found a dead mouse in our food. Catching mice had become one of our frequent entertainments. Except for a human being, the first prisoner that my son

saw in his prison life was a mouse. With much difficulty we tied a thread to the tail of the mouse. My child took the other end of the thread and played with the tiny animal.

My husband was extremely enthusiastic and anxious to see his son. I found out that he was constantly trying to visit the baby. I was not permitted to see my husband and the baby would not go with anyone else. I repeatedly asked the authorities why I should not be allowed to visit my legal and legitimate spouse. They used to reply all the time with a ready-made answer: "You are non-believers, therefore your marriage is illegitimate; not only your touch, but even your glance at each other is considered an unforgivable sin".

One day they allowed the baby to see his father, but they were suspicious of political prisoners taking him. They brought non-political prisoners to carry the baby to his father. The visit did not take more than half an hour. The child cried until he almost fainted. He did not like to be carried by a strange woman on the one hand and he was not used to seeing a man on the other. He was terribly afraid of seeing his father.

The father visited his child once more. As I was not allowed to see my husband, I asked one of my closest friends to take him to his father. This time he also started crying and screaming. The visit was too short. A few days later, the guards gave me a letter from my husband, in which he referred to the visit:

It was an unpleasant visit; whenever he visits me, he starts crying. I can't stand my child weeping. Therefore, it is better for both of us not to visit each other anymore.

And that was the last visit.

Fifteen months after the initial arrest, they executed my husband without permitting me to see him before his death. He was twenty-eight years old. He was a human rights activist, a man of letters, a poet, a writer and a master of the arts. He had great passion for life and a hope for the ultimate salvation of humankind. I still have twelve letters he wrote to me in prison, each full of love, hope and passion for life.

I came to know about my husband's execution two months after his death. When I met the Shariah judge – the judge of Islamic jurisprudence – who was the hanging judge as well, I asked him why they killed my husband. Neither one of us believed in violence, nor had we been involved in any kind of violent activities. He smiled and told me that he ordered the execution of my husband because he was intelligent, resisted all tortures, refused to give them any information and his spirit could not be broken.

Here I felt the triple burdens of victimization: as a political activist, as a woman and as a mother of a little baby. Those of us who were imprisoned with our babies had an especially difficult life. My child had no idea of the outside world; his world was limited to a small cell and the most vivid events in his life were when I was brought back to the cell, my body covered in wounds. The child, however, loved listening to stories and I had plenty of time to narrate different tales to him. This was not without difficulty. He had no idea about many things in the story, such as animals and people. I had to explain these through drawings and pictures in the newspapers. The child used to ask intelligent questions.

After many months of languishing in jail, a small change brightened our monotonous life. We were transferred to a room from where it was possible to see a glimpse of the outside world. There was a window close to the ceiling far from the prisoners' access. We were lucky as the screen that covered the window had been torn apart. We could see the light and a tiny portion of the sky. Another fortunate incident happened: they brought us three-storied beds. My child used to climb the ladder to the bed on top that was close to the window. He was eager to look outside and discover things that he observed. He used to ask with astonishment: "What is this in the sky?" "It is a bird", I would reply. "Something is moving; what's that?" "It is called a car". "I am seeing a pile of something green. What's that?" "It's a tree".

The child was very happy during the visiting day of the week. That was a different day. People used to come and go and laugh. Children were not allowed to go for a visit. My child and I were "incommunicado" prisoners and therefore had no visitors. They imposed this sinister technique against steadfast prisoners who resisted their torture and intimidations. Prison authorities were afraid of the exchange of information between the prisoner and her family. They hoped that by depriving me from visits by the family, they could break my morale. Unaware of these ominous techniques, my child was overjoyed when others visited their loved ones. Visitors brought lots of food and fruits and the prisoners left the best items for the children.

Finally the day came when the prospect of our freedom could be seen on the horizon. When the child reached the age of four, I heard rumours about "amnesty". I had been sentenced to eight years of imprisonment, but they commuted it to four. Besides, the child had reached the age of four and according to the guards he was a mature person and was not allowed to see his mother's body. I could no longer take him with me for bathing: "We are going to release you because of your child". Everybody was happy about our imminent release and congratulated us on our upcoming freedom. Although my child had no idea of freedom, he was happy as a

result of the general happiness. He used to confuse the term “freedom” with “free” and declare repeatedly: “I want to go for free; I love free”.

It did not take long before the child found himself in a strange world. He was unbelievably panicky with men. At home, when he saw me sitting without a scarf, he used to come to me shaking with fear and warning me: “Hide your hair mom; cover it with a scarf; there is a man here”. I tried to calm him down: “Don’t be afraid son; he is my brother and that one is my father”. I could not, however, convince him and he responded with fear: “No mom, these men will eat your head”.

He was panicky at the sound of the wind and music. He used to get angry upon hearing the sound of electric appliances and moving vehicles, and I had to pay for that. After hearing such sounds, he used to come to me and bite me. I was covered with bruises from his bites. He missed his “aunties” a lot. He had become so attached that it was difficult for him to live without them. Here was something surprising; he never made a remark about going back to prison and seeing them. He used to say all the time: “Mom, we are very lonely; let’s bring all my aunts here”. Then he would name them one by one.

Outside jail, the child behaved in an abnormal way. He was curious to know about many things and had lots of questions. I had to live in my late husband’s house under the strict supervision of my father-in-law. This left a negative impact on his upbringing. He had become lonelier. One day we went to the market place. I was holding his hand. I saw an apple in his other hand. I asked him where he got it. He pointed to a fruit shop’s basket. When I told him not to do it again, he told me with surprise: “Why not? They have put it there for us to take”. He had no idea about private property or about buying and selling. He took everything from anywhere and used it immediately. When he saw shoes he took them and immediately put them on and threw his old shoes away. If it was food, he ate it immediately. Although he was a grown-up child, we had to carry him in our arms or on our shoulders to prevent him from his pilfering habit.

I remained out of jail for one year. My father had put up his property and his life as a guarantee for my release. I had to report to the prison authorities every month. On one of these occasions, they re-arrested me because they did not like the “fast-paced manner” with which I was climbing the stairs, and the apparent “aggressive” way that I signed my name in the reporting book. They did not allow me to take my child with me; he was left with very little protection. When they released me after six months, I found my child in a desperate situation. He had been passed around, sometimes taken care of by my relatives, sometimes by neighbours and at other times, by no one at all. He was not initially ready

to accept me as his mother because of the tremendous hardship he had gone through.

It took my child two years to adapt to the new environment outside jail. However, for many years when he saw a guard or someone in a paramilitary uniform, he avoided him and refused to speak with him. Soon, much before I was expecting it, he asked me who his father was. We had made a family decision not to tell him. We had made a joint decision to present his grandfather as his dad, but he did not believe me: "No mom, I do not believe it. You are young and my father should be much younger than this gentleman". He was not yet six.

One day he came to me with a disturbing question. His cousin had told him that the guards had decapitated his father. I felt that I could no longer hide the story from him. I asked him to be patient. I thought for a couple of days and developed a method based on the stories told by Shahrzad in the book of the Arabian Nights. Every day, I narrated a part of the story, beginning with the formation of history, establishment of governments, and development of empires. Gradually, I made him understand concepts like tyranny, injustice, freedom and struggle. Then I told him about the Iranian society, the lack of freedom and his father's campaigns as a freedom fighter. He learned about the fear his father had caused in the hearts of his oppressors and why they had killed him. The young fellow accepted the reality of his life quietly and rationally. He never showed any negative reaction. He did, however, remain silent. When I would ask him why, he would nod and say: "Mom, I'm thinking of why this happened." He was seven at the time.

He was a good and intelligent student but he preferred to be by himself and live in isolation. He did not like to socialize with other people or argue with them. He wanted to be with me all the time but this did not happen and he grudgingly accepted that.

When he reached fourteen, he was no longer the same person. His silence turned to anger, as if a big bang had happened in his life. He was reluctant to tell me the reason. When I insisted repeatedly, he burst into tears and told me: "I'm very unhappy because my destiny was determined before my birth and I'm now facing a *fait accompli*. I have no freedom of action or thought".

With the passage of time my life, as a woman, became more and more difficult. I reached a point when I felt living outside of jail was not much better. I had been left with no job, no money and no accommodation. A shadow was following me all the time. My father-in-law blamed me for everything and began harassing me. I was left with no choice but to accept a traditional arranged marriage in an attempt to protect my child and myself. A year later, I became pregnant and delivered another baby boy.

Unfortunately, my second marriage turned out to be an abusive one; it was a kind of slavery. At home, I was constantly abused and harassed by my husband. Outside of my home, I was harassed by security forces that were suspicious of me. Life was becoming harder and harder every day. I reached a point where internal and external forces of evil put my very survival at risk. I do not want to enter into this entirely different story here. My son was approaching his eighteenth birthday – the age of military service – and was not allowed to leave Iran before completing his compulsory service in the army. Life has taught him to withstand hardship and he has acquired a premature maturity. I was not worried about his safety because, unlike his father and myself, he was politically innocent, and therefore not at immediate risk.

When he came to know about my predicament, he insisted that I escape to a safe haven along with his vulnerable brother. He was so worried about our safety that he offered his support by saying that he would work hard to save money in order to save our lives. He comforted me by saying that he would join us when we were established in our new home. I was left with no other option but to leave him in Iran and come to Canada with my youngest son. I was so sad to have to leave my son and face an unknown destiny.

I have been in Canada for around eight-and-a-half years. I am very thankful to all of the people in Canada who understood my torture and trauma, and helped me with my refugee claim and permanent resident status. That includes my lawyers, physicians, psychiatrists, nurses, friends, counsellors from the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT), and many other people.

I am presently a proud citizen of Canada. I remained separated from my eldest son for more than six and a half years. His file was closed twice by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. His file for family unification was opened with great difficulty by the intervention of the CCVT and my then Member of Parliament, the honourable Bill Graham. He finally arrived in Canada on February 22, 2007. He is now going to school with the hope of joining a useful university program. Unfortunately, he still suffers from the traumas of his childhood. He is, however, strong enough to cope with his trauma and act as a great support for me and his brother.

I am proud of myself as a woman, a political prisoner and a loving mother. More often than not I sit with both my children and discuss about justice. We are enthusiastically looking into the future and cherish the hope that justice and freedom will prevail across the globe.

ENDNOTES

- * Part of this article previously appeared as a chapter in Mossallanejed, Ezat (2005) *Torture in the Age of Fear*, Hamilton: Seraphim Editions, pp. 113-132. These portions have been reprinted and edited with permission from the author and publisher.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Saeideh was born in Azerbaijan, Iran. She is presently living in Toronto and is involved in volunteer work as a community activist.

A Daughter's Cry for Justice

Osiris López

My father's name was José Eduardo López; he was a human rights activist, journalist, and the vice-president of CODEH (Comite de Derechos Humanos de Honduras), a local human rights organization in Honduras. He was a principled man who believed that everyone should be able to live with dignity, food, shelter, education and health care. He was killed for those ideals. This is the first time since my father's kidnapping, torture and murder that I have been asked for my opinion. What was my childhood like? How was I imprisoned? How did my experience shape my perception of justice?

Childhood ended for me at the age of seven. It was August 10, 1981 and my father was on his way home from school when he was abducted and taken to the Directorate of National Investigations (DNI) headquarters by death squad members better known as "Batallón 316". A witness had the courage to contact my mother with information on my father's whereabouts the next morning.

He was held captive at the DNI headquarters for five days. In those five days of barbaric interrogation he endured countless torture techniques including sleep deprivation, being hung by his feet while men pistol whipped him, having a bucket tied to his testicles while men threw rocks and pebbles into it, being held in a cage-like room where he could neither sit nor stand, having his head held in a bucket full of urine and feces, and being suffocated by the famous "capucha" – a rubber mask used to replicate the sensation of drowning. During his capture, he lost a total of fifteen pounds. My father was released on my mother's birthday on August 14, 1981. After the abduction, he fled Honduras; my brother was just over a year old and my mother was two months pregnant with my second brother. The day my father left to live illegally in the United States my heart broke. I knew something was wrong, but exactly why he had to flee I simply could not understand. I remember looking, waving and crying as the airplane took off.

My father lived illegally in the U.S. for fourteen months. My mother visited him shortly after giving birth to my brother and she realized that they could not provide a good future for us living illegally in a foreign country. So the next step was to look into another safe haven. To my father, that safe haven was Canada. Unfortunately, he was denied refugee status at the Canadian consulate in Atlanta, Georgia. Despite the right-wing military rule and my father's own experience, the officials stated that he did not have enough proof that the death threats were real and that his life was in danger. Honduras at that time was not considered by the

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada to be a country with sufficient political turmoil to be a 'refugee producing' nation. The rejection of refugee status compounded my family's painful sense of injustice as it later on proved to be fatal for my father.¹ I remember the fear I felt as a young child when our hopes for safety were crushed.

After his refugee claim was denied, my father chose to return to Honduras to his wife and children. He decided that if he was to be killed, he wanted to at least meet his youngest son and spend some time with his family. The last time I saw him was the morning of Christmas Eve 1984. I was supposed to go with my father to pick up his paycheck that morning. I remember that he approached my bunk bed where I was sleeping and since I was still tired, he told me to stay. Before he left, he kissed me goodbye and told me to look after my mother and my brothers, and I fell back asleep. My father never returned home.

After my father's disappearance, we fled Honduras to Costa Rica. Our time waiting to be sponsored by the Canadian government was daunting and was perhaps when I became acutely aware of the tremendous impact that this experience would have on my life. In November 1985, we boarded a plane from San Jose, Costa Rica to our new refuge in Canada. As the plane took off, tears began to roll down my cheeks as I sang the Honduran national anthem and braced myself for what was to come. That day I took another step away from my childhood, and left everything behind – our family, friends, culture, language, climate, country, and most of all, my dad. While I felt safer in Canada, I still felt confined at the beginning because I was torn away from everything I knew. I was constrained by language and cultural barriers, and my family was also imprisoned in poverty that we did not experience prior to coming to Canada. We were held captive inside our circumstances.

I would be imprisoned emotionally for years to come. I was consumed by the guilt that I felt for not being at my father's side on that fateful day. I have always thought that if they had seen him with a little girl, they might have had pity on him and not have taken him. I still struggle with the self-blame, although I know rationally that the responsibility lies with the torturers. I experienced insomnia, recurring dreams, vivid night terrors, self-isolation and difficulty establishing trust. I can still recall a recurring dream that played out vividly in my mind for years. Every time the phone rang or every time there was a knock at our door, my brothers and I, and even my mother would run. Each time we all held our breath thinking that it might be him at the other end. My father's disappearance also deprived me of the childhood joys of Christmas. I have never been able to celebrate that holiday because of the deep pain, guilt and despair that I feel at the time of year my father disappeared.² I wonder if the

torturers ever think about how they ruined a little girl's Christmas not only on that fateful night, but for her entire lifetime.

Even when my mother remarried, we all asked "but mom what will you do when daddy comes back?" As you can imagine we had an extremely difficult time adjusting to a stepfather. We had difficulty moving forward and in a sense we were victims of emotional torture. We were prisoners locked in our hopes and dreams. We felt locked and forgotten in limbo. How can anyone move forward with life when there is no closure?

In 1994, when I was 19 years old, *The Facts Speak for Themselves* was released. It was authored by Leo Valladares Lanza and translated by the Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL) and Human Rights Watch / Americas. This was a preliminary report on the disappearances by the National Commissioner for the Protection on Human Rights in Honduras. The following is an excerpt from *The Facts Speak for Themselves* that outlines my father's execution:

Murder of Eduardo López:

Mario Asdrubal Quiñones captured and interrogated López in the National Investigations Directorate (DNI) in San Pedro Sula, but López had to be transferred to the house in the Guamalito neighbourhood since he was recognized by another prisoner in the Directorate's offices. In the house in Guamalito, the declarant interrogated López over five days, at the end of which he was executed by Manuel Robles (alias "La Mole") and by Maj. Antúnez Pagoada ("Miron Socadito"); the motorist on that occasion was Cristobal Lainez ("El Loco Hogman"). When these men returned at two in the morning, Pagoada's shirt was bloodied, which prompted the declarant to ask if the detainee had resisted, to which they responded no and that he had stained the shirt dragging López's body.³

Although we finally had some concrete answers, it was difficult to read how my father was tortured, killed and dumped like a piece of meaningless trash. The phrase "time heals all wounds" has been relevant in my journey because I have slowly released myself of the anger and hate that imprisoned me for years.

In March 2009, I traveled back to Honduras after living in exile for twenty-four years. I have been struggling since my return from Honduras because in preparing this journal article, I had wanted to share all the reasons why I believed that justice does not exist. After all, Jose Barrera Martinez, a member of "Battalion 3-16" and one of my father's torturers

was granted asylum in Canada, yet my father, the victim, had been turned away. I have never understood or reconciled how unjust the immigration system had been in my father's case. I also did not think it was fair that I had to grow up without a father simply because he spoke up against injustice and sought to protect the human rights of his fellow Hondurans. Although we were grateful for it, the shiny new furniture that the Canadian government bought for us when we got our apartment was not worth my father's life.

Nevertheless, the truth is that the recent journey back to my homeland has given me new hope and understanding because I no longer feel alone in my sorrow, in my struggle to seek justice and closure. There is an abundant amount of optimism to be found in this new realization. I have worked hard to break free from the feelings that have imprisoned me prior to going to Honduras. This trip simply unleashed a new sense of fight within me. It gave me the boost I needed in order to see that my father died because he strongly believed in human rights for all, just like I believe in seeking justice for him and for us, his family.

For years, I felt that my brothers and I were damaged goods of some sort. I knew that the three of us were different and everyone around us seemed to know it too. It was a great source of comfort for me to read a study⁴ that was done by Debora Munczek Soler (1996) which outlines the psychological impact of the children of the disappeared in Honduras. This study revealed all the psychological trials and tribulations that my brothers and I experienced growing up, and it 'normalized' our experience. Munczek Soler's study revealed that the children impacted by disappeared parents experienced regression, sleep-walking and talking, the loss of the ability to perform newly acquired skills, extreme attachment, separation, recurring dreams, insomnia, difficulty developing trust and vivid night terrors – only a few of the side effects that haunted our childhood. My brothers and I struggled differently with our emotions. Since I was older and had the privilege of knowing my father longer, my grief was at least comforted by my memories of a loving father, although sometimes those same memories reinforced how much I had lost and made the pain worse. But my younger brothers experienced frustration because as much as they lost their father, they also struggled to remember him given that they were so little at the time of his disappearance. The anger they experience due to their struggles to remember our father has been extremely hard on them.

In Honduras this past March, I connected with a woman; she⁵ is also the daughter of a human rights activist who disappeared in Honduras. Our communication helps us to express our common sorrow and struggles. She has become yet another reason for me to see that there is purpose behind my fight. I feel comforted in being able to share with someone

who has gone through a similar experience. Our solidarity and mutual understanding has also helped me feel more liberated from the emotional prison that has confined me for so long.

I have come to realize that it is never too late to seek justice and closure. In late 2008, the then Honduran President Mel Zelaya apologized for the deaths and forced disappearances of hundreds of left-winged opponents at the hands of U.S. trained military during the 1980's. This was the first time that the Honduran government officially and publicly acknowledged its responsibility in my father's death. The apology was a confirmation to the world that what we had been through was not a lie, because for years after my father's disappearance, the rumours in Honduras were that my father was alive and well living here in Canada with his family. Overall, my family was relieved and pleased about the apology. Although this apology came twenty-five years after my father's disappearance, I feel that there may be hope for justice in the near future and what I ultimately seek is concrete official justice. The apology is not justice enough for me and it never will be. The justice I seek is judicial and I want all the men involved, regardless of social status or rank, to be held accountable for their wrong-doing. Out of hundreds of people who were tortured and kidnapped, 184 were never seen again, my father included. Although thirty Honduran army officials have been found guilty, only one has been sentenced. Impunity is alive and strong in Honduras, but I have hope that, with enough perseverance, my family will get the justice we deserve through the court system.

Despite my journey towards healing, many matters remain unsettled. The high ranking officials inside "Battalion 316" were the brains behind the operation, and everyone else was trained to carry out kidnapping, torturing, interrogating, murdering and disposing of bodies so they would never be found, therefore erasing all evidence. These high-ranking officials continue to be involved in Honduran politics, armed forces and business. Although my father's case has been well documented in *The Facts Speak for Themselves*, a report which recounts the kidnapping, torture, and ultimate murder of over a 120 men and women, the people responsible have never been held accountable.

Alvaro Flores Ponce is a man who lives an affluent life as the owner of a security company in the capital city Tegucigalpa, Honduras. He was the head of the DNI in Honduras at the time of my father's death. He still has many powerful connections and continues to be unaccountable for his role in the disappearances. The man who tortured my father for five days after his kidnapping and who ultimately murdered him, allegedly died when the bridge he was crossing during Hurricane Mitch in 1998 collapsed. Another man, Jose Barrera Martinez, who I reported

to the RCMP when *The Facts Speak from Themselves* was released, was eventually deported from Canada for his involvement in my father's torture. It took many years for Barrera Martinez's deportation to happen, because he argued that he deserved clemency for the testimony he gave in *The Facts Speak from Themselves*. A while after his deportation he was apparently killed in Honduras by someone riding a motorcycle in plain daylight. Although these men will never be made to stand trial for their roles in my father's torture and death, I feel somewhat safer and partially redeemed in knowing that they are no longer on this planet.

I am hopeful that our "justice" will come the day we see Alvaro Flores Ponce, Mario Asdrubal Quinones, Manuel Robles, Mayro Antunez Pagoada and Cristobal Lainez stand trial through the Inter-American Court or other international courts. The day these men admit to, and are prosecuted for their well-documented involvement in my father's murder, and are sentenced for their lack of humanity and respect for human life, will be the day that I will be able to breath a deep sigh of relief. I am aware that my words are expressing what some may perceive as retributive justice and that in some ways I appear to be saying that the perpetrators' imprisonment will liberate me from my own confinement. I know that the situation is more complicated than that and I acknowledge that I am reflecting on this matter from my perspective as the devastated daughter of a beloved man who was brutally tortured and stolen from my life.

As I edit my reflection, my hope for justice has since faded since President Mel Zelaya was ousted in a military coup on June 28, 2009 and Honduras returned to a military style rule under right wing leadership. After the military coup, the 1980's founder of "Batallón 316" was appointed as an advisor in the interim government. As a result, what little progress was made in Honduras since the 1980's may be lost. These changes are frightening and paralyzing because they are halting the search for justice for past wrongs, and worse, they are creating the conditions for further human rights violations, including torture and disappearances. I hope that the international community and the Honduran people can help to restore authentic democracy so that justice and peace will prevail for all.

Notwithstanding the Honduran government's apology in 2008, our search for formal criminal justice for the detention, torture and murder of my father has come up empty, and for that, my family remains frustrated. However, I recognize that my father's case has received important and meaningful attention from social justice groups. It is in the area of social justice that my father's case has progressed the most and where our family has felt comfort, peace, hope and healing. It has been social justice supporters who have helped to free us, if only partially, from our emotional imprisonment.

It should be noted that my quest for ‘criminal’ justice mentioned above does not consume me, and it is often both calmed and contradicted by my father’s own perspective on his experience. Upon his release after his first detention and torture, my mother asked my father how he felt about his torturers. He responded by explaining that he could not hate his torturers because they were just a product of the corrupt society and system that we lived in, and that they were trying to put food on the table for their children. My father’s perspective was admirable and it leans on the side of forgiveness. I do try so hard to adopt my father’s approach as it is a sense of justice that reconciles rather than seeks revenge. But admittedly, it is a struggle and that struggle is sometimes even complicated by my own anger at my father who chose to risk his life for the human rights of others,⁶ and consequently left his family behind to suffer such a deep and life-long loss. Nevertheless, on most days when I feel confident and strong, I try to side with my father’s admirable explanation of the context of his own suffering. But I also struggle with our family’s right to hold his torturers accountable. As you can see, my search for justice has not been down one particular path. It has been complicated by a variety of personal emotions and rationalizations that have caused me to flip flop between and criss-cross within different options of justice. I realize that imprisoning the bodies of my father’s torturers may not automatically free me from my emotional prison, but I do feel that there is a need for responsibility to be taken. That responsibility may never be in the form of the physical confinement of my father’s torturers, but a public admission of their wrong-doing and a genuinely remorseful apology would go some way to holding them accountable.

As part of this accountability, another void that I expect the Honduran state to fill is to identify the whereabouts of my father’s body. My father has been missing for twenty-five years now. I no longer dream of the day that we will find his body and be able to give him the burial he deserves because this will most likely never happen. Out of fear of disappointment, I prefer to not dream of the day that I will be able to lay flowers upon his grave, but I will think about the day that my brothers and I have the courage to build a memorial in his honour. He deserves at least that and we deserve closure. In this sense, justice means more than accountability; it is also about respecting the dignity of the victim, in this case my father and his family.

I feel a great sense of satisfaction in knowing that my father’s memory and legacy will never be forgotten thanks to organizations like Amnesty International and Acceso International, which have created global awareness about torture and human rights, and have established educational memorials in his name. Most importantly, his memory will

never be forgotten by us, his children. Our father will live in our hearts and minds forever.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Since I was frustrated with the impact of the Canadian immigration system, as a teenager, I researched more about the process and I learned that there were many innocent people whose lives were in danger but who were turned away. My father's life and later his death were in the hands of a fragmented immigration system with judges who seemed ill-informed about the real dangers in other countries.
- ² Christmas 2008 was the first time since my father's disappearance that I have felt able to prepare and celebrate the holiday. It was part of my effort to take back the power that the torturers had stripped from me and to move forward.
- ³ Excerpt from page 197 of Valladeres Lanza, Leo (1994) *The Facts Speak for Themselves: The Preliminary Report on Disappearances of the National Commissioner for the Protection of Human Rights in Honduras*, Washington (DC): Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL) and Human Rights Watch / Americas.
- ⁴ It was a study by COFADEH (Comite de Familiares Detenidos-Desaparecidos en Honduras) and the National Commission on Human Rights. It was published in September 1996 and translated by Daniel Matamoros Batson.
- ⁵ The woman's name has been withheld to protect her safety.
- ⁶ I know that my father's fight for human rights was also to make our country a better place for his own children and not just for fellow Hondurans.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Osiris López has been working in a community health centre in Canada for almost a decade. Osiris has also been an active volunteer with a local sexual assault centre since 2006, assisting with the crisis support line, the board of directors and the fundraising committee. She was part of the International Youth for Peace and Justice Tour at the age of thirteen and has recently restarted her public speaking about the situation in Honduras. She ultimately hopes to complete a degree in Social Work and plans to continue to be an active voice for human rights in her community.

My Changing Idea of Justice

*Ezat Mossallanejed **

I came to know about the concept of justice at the age of eight, when my teacher, a religious gentleman, reiterated the following maxim: “God is just”. I doubted this message when I witnessed a bereaved father in our neighbourhood stretching both his hands towards the sky, shouting at God: “Oh God, where is your justice?” Twelve years later, at the age of twenty, I was acquainted with a theory of the Iranian poet Omar Khayyam who cast doubt on heavenly justice:

Ah love! Could you and I with Him conspire,
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits – and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart’s Desire!

(Fitzgerald, 1879, p. 193).

I shared my doubt with my father who told me that divine justice should not be gauged by the petty problems of the individual members of the mortal race.

In my young age, I was fascinated by the idea of retributive justice through reading a novel by Alexander Dumas (1996) the Father called *Comte de Monte Cristo*. It is the story of Edmond Dante, a man imprisoned under false pretences. Dante, who was supposed to marry a wealthy woman, was falsely accused by his friends of being a spy, and was sentenced to seven years in prison. There, he plotted his revenge against the friends who had betrayed him. Upon his release, he exterminated his treacherous enemies one by one and rewarded those who had helped him.

In those days, with all my passion, I advocated the theory of retribution: “Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, nose for a nose”, and so on. I believed that leaving criminals with impunity would provoke them to commit more crimes. Punishment should be proportionate to the crime committed by the criminal. It took me a few years to abandon this theory in favour of restorative and reformative justice. The aim of Restorative Justice is to bring new awareness to the victim, the community and the perpetrator. It is based on the fact that the damage of a crime is primarily harm to peaceful human interaction. I prefer Reformative Justice because it is normally not possible to restore a broken state of life. The aim of both is making perpetrators aware of their injustice and persuading them to compensate for their actions. I came to this understanding long after my imprisonment and torture.

At the age of twenty-one, I began my compulsory military service. We were forced to go through a military course in the infantry battalion of the military academy. In the army, we were taught that justice would come with obedience. Our superiors considered God as the source of absolute justice and the king as the shadow of God. Justice, according to them, had no meaning but to be obedient to the army as the king's arm. We were expected to obey the rules and commands unquestionably: "There is no 'why' in the army", we were told. In this period, I repeatedly asked myself: "What about a condition in which the law itself is unjust?" I found it to be gross injustice when, for example, our commanders expected the same performance from each and every soldier without considering their different physical capabilities. I also found it unfair when somebody in our battalion committed an offence and the commander punished us all indiscriminately despite our innocence. This reminded me of a Persian poem:

A blacksmith committed murder in the city of Balkh [Northern Afghanistan].

The judge beheaded a coppersmith in the city of Shoshtar [West of Iran].

Of course, in some cases, I experienced fair treatment in the army. In the early morning, they called sick people for referral to the hospital. I found this attention to vulnerable people a just and humanitarian gesture on the part of the army. It was unfortunate that many soldiers pretended to be sick as a means of getting exempted from the hard work. I found it to be a misuse of a just treatment. To this day, I believe that each and every citizen has the responsibility to appreciate justice and promote it by her or his appropriate behaviour. Seeking social justice is meaningless if we are not just in our individual lives. We need to fulfil our duties to our neighbours, colleagues and family members with good faith and temper.

At the age of twenty-two, I was admitted to the post graduate program of the Centre for Advanced International Studies, University of Tehran. At the Centre, I learned about the concepts of natural law and natural rights. I was very much fascinated by philosophers of Enlightenment, especially John Locke. I came to know that a just government represented such natural rights as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I agree with Locke that "to understand political power... we must consider what state all men are naturally in and that is a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit within the bounds of the law of nature" (Burt, 1939, p. 404).

I appreciated natural law as the origin of justice at the individual, social and global levels. There are certain laws inherent in human nature that no authority can take away from us. Freedom and equality are the main components of natural law. Human rights are nothing but the understanding and implementation of these indivisible, inherent, natural properties of humankind.

It was also at the Centre that I learned that poverty was unjust, and that wealth and income should be distributed in a just way. It is not fair that a tiny minority live in total abundance at the cost of the starvation of millions of poor people. I was very much fascinated by the Iranian Marxists' slogan of, "from each according to his abilities and to each according to his labour". At this time, Iran was ruled by a tyrannical government. All power was concentrated at the hands of a monarch – the Shah – who ruled the country by an iron fist. Any kind of opposition was brutally suppressed by a notorious secret police called SAVAK. The country's wealth from oil and other natural resources was plundered by the international oil monopolies in collaboration with a tiny, ultra-rich family, with the Shah at the top. The majority of the people were extremely poor and malnourished. In Shiraz, the Nomads were selling their elder children to save other members of the family. In the eastern province of Baluchistan, people ate grass due to the lack of food. All these seemed to me as symptoms of deep injustice rooted in the political system. I decided to struggle against tyranny.

I involved myself in civil and human rights movements. I chose to write about human rights. I also joined small groups of like-minded intellectuals to raise our voices against economic inequality and autocracy.

It was on a beautiful April day in 1973, when two well-dressed and quite nice-looking men entered my office, wearing civilian clothes. At that time, I was working as the Deputy General Manager of Organization, Education, and Methods in the Ministry of Water and Power. They handcuffed me from behind, blindfolded and took me away in a car. Soon after reaching the destination, I found myself in a dungeon.

They tied me to a metal bed, spread-eagled, and a large, burly man who looked like a gorilla, began beating me with a wooden stick. He struck me so hard that the stick broke in half after four blows. After a few more blows, the remaining stick broke into two pieces. He beat me another twenty times with the thickest part and then exchanged his stick for a thick, black electrical cable. Over the next several hours, I was beaten with a variety of instruments. I was beaten on the soles of my feet and forced to run around the room while being pushed from one man to another.

The object of this beating was to extract information about my friends

and associates. I was supposed to give the names of guerrillas and their safe houses, despite the fact that I was not involved with any violent faction and had no idea about things like that.

At some point, they took me back to my house and searched it in front of me. I remember one of the torturers, the Gorilla that had beaten me on the soles of the feet, whispering that I should not be limping because it was shameful; my neighbours would feel that I was ridiculing them. Yet I could not walk normally because my feet were badly injured. They did not find anything in my house except a single pair of hiking boots, which they made a fuss over, insisting they must belong to a guerilla, and quite a few fresh dates, which they also said were there to feed my guerilla friends.

After I was taken back to jail, they blindfolded me again and ordered me to stand facing the wall in front of the torture chamber. I could hear the sound of lashes followed by torturers' shouting and insults mixed with the pleading, weeping, and screaming of the victims. I waited for half an hour or so – that seemed like an eternity to me – until my turn came again.

A boy I knew, a second year law student to whom I had given two pamphlets on human rights, was brought in and I was asked to identify him. It was then I learned that he had been arrested and had given my name along with some others to SAVAK, implicating me in guerilla activities. All the information he had given them was false; he must have simply told them anything he could think of in order to end his own torture. This is the blatant example of a sickening injustice inherent in the crime of torture. Under intolerable pain, victims may give false information in order to stop their agony. Such information can lead to the arrest, torture and execution of innocent people. I had a terrible feeling when I found that all my pain was over a false confession extracted under torture from someone else. Here, it is pain that speaks and provides right or wrong information.

When I contradicted the boy and asked whether he was not ashamed of himself, my torturers immediately took him away and intensified my torture. It was so difficult to stand the pain. With every blow I felt an intolerable pain running through my body. After some time, the man who had arrested me – he was, in fact, the chief interrogator – entered, and said my interrogators had permission to torture me to death, and that they should not worry about the consequences.

The beating continued until I could not feel any more pain, only a vague tingling sensation each time I was hit. It was at that point that the Gorilla decided to stop, since there was no point in continuing. All the

torturers went away and left me in an agonizing limbo in the middle of the night in the dark torture chamber. After some time, two soldiers entered. They took me by the arms and helped me towards a large brightly-lit room. There are moments in life that one never forgets: when I glanced back I saw the trail of my footprints in the bright mosaic of the floor. They were made by blood dripping from the soles of my feet.

I found myself among human butchers who were ready to tear my body apart. The terrible feeling of helplessness and haplessness engulfed me. I resisted their threats, but it was spontaneous and instinctive. In that room I found the Gorilla and three of my torturers, including the person who had arrested me. He told me: "I am Dr. Hosseinzadeh. I am the inventor of torture. I will design a torture suited to your nature and character. We'll extract all the information you have".

In SAVAK, all torturers called themselves doctors. Later, I found out that his real name was Reza Attarpour, the most notorious torturer and the chief of all interrogators in Iran. He threatened me with burning and said that he would pump boiling water into my rectum. Thankfully, neither threat was carried out.

The moment when I saw my cell was one of the happiest in my life. It was a small room, but it had a mattress on the floor and four pillows, and I knew I would have at least a small reprieve from the torture. Yet, paradoxically, as soon as the door closed behind me, I felt everything that had happened wash over me and I became desperate. If I could have died then, I would have. Every single person I have spoken to who has been tortured has confirmed that there always comes a point when you wish to die.

In the morning, all four pillows on which I had rested my legs were stained with blood. Since I was unable to walk, one of the guards carried me to the prison doctor. When the doctor unwrapped the bandages from my legs I saw that strips of flesh were hanging off the bottoms of my feet. The doctor said to me: "You must be an extremely dangerous man, one of the guerrilla leaders, to have been tortured so badly".

I was highly disturbed when I found that the doctor was playing the role of an interrogator in a different way. Initially, he used the softest possible language to assure me that he had nothing to do with torturers and interrogators. He, then, asked me to reveal my information to him in total confidence. "They will", he said, "extract all your information under more severe torture; as a doctor, I do not want you to be tortured; give me your information; I will act as an intermediary and ask them to be nice to you". I found this absolutely unjust. It was nothing but an inversion of the right order of things. Medical science and practices are for healing,

not for killing. According to the UN principles of Medical Ethics (1982), medical personnel should put all their emphasis on treating their patients without causing them any physical or psychological harm.

I told him that I was merely a human rights activist and had been falsely accused. After that the doctor apologized for having to cause me more pain. He said that he had no anaesthetics, but in order to prevent gangrene he would have to trim the flesh off my legs and feet before dressing the wounds. It hurt, but not as much as the beatings had.

Both of my legs, especially the left one, were completely black right up to the knees. I passed blood instead of urine for twenty-four hours. For one week I could not walk at all. A guard had to carry me to the bathroom in his arms. For fifty days, I walked with great difficulty. Over the next four years, I spent time in many prisons and was beaten on numerous occasions, but I was never tortured as badly as that first time.

They kept me in the limbo of torture and interrogation for more than a year until they sent me to a military tribunal. It was against the fundamental principle of justice that calls for non-discrimination and equality before the law. I was a civilian and a civil rights activist. The country's two-tier judicial system was used unjustly to try me in a military court that was obedient to the secret police and lacked independent judges, prosecutors and counsellors. Their job was to put a rubber stamp on the sentences pre-determined by the Intelligence. When I go back to those days, I feel that the goal of mock trials as such was to give a level of legitimacy to the process. The audience was primarily torturers and others who were involved with the Intelligence. It was an attempt to justify their ghoulis actions to themselves. The secondary audience was the victims and their families. The torturers frequently boasted that they had the best system of justice in the world.

The military court sentenced me to three years of imprisonment. Just before the end of my sentence, the Shah had established his one-party system and ordered SAVAK not to release any political prisoners. This was a total mockery of legal justice. The tyrannical regime of the Shah had not bothered to respect its own rules. Thus, people like me, who had served their sentence, were transferred to a new prison and kept in indefinite limbo.

In time, I learned that they had arrested me because the boy who broke under torture told them I was a liaison between the Marxist guerillas and the fundamentalists, which would have made me extremely dangerous. SAVAK must have realized their mistake soon enough, certainly within a short time of the arrest. Yet, without bothering about a semblance of justice, they kept me in prison for another four years. At first because they

feared that if I were released before my wounds had healed the story of the torture would get out and later because they hoped I would eventually give them some excuse that would allow them to justify the initial arrest. I came to know that tyranny and injustice are twin brothers. Tyrannical regimes do not bother about individual rights and are indifferent to the need for due process. They justify all their unjust activities in the name of defending national security or public interests.

I spent two years and four months in horrible detention centres run by SAVAK (secret police). Prisoners were left incommunicado there. The spectre of torture was hanging over everyone's head. At any time, they could take us to the torture chamber. I found a great deal of empathy among our jail mates. We used to forget about our political differences and discuss issues of common interest. Food was adequate but of poor quality. As prisoners had no choice of their diet, sick prisoners suffered most. Although some guards assisted torturers, quite a few of them abstained from torturing us. A tiny number of guards went so far as to express their empathy for prisoners. We had been denied books, pens and papers. There was no option but to share our knowledge verbally, on a one to one basis, in an attempt to protect ourselves from possible informers.

Out of the twenty-eight months in SAVAK jails, I spent five months in a jail that was jointly run by police and SAVAK. The condition of the prison was extremely difficult. Both the public and solitary cells were unhygienic and reeking. The overwhelming majority of guards were cruel, competing in collaboration with professional torturers. Public cells were overcrowded to the extent that they sometimes had no available spaces to sleep. In public cells, we were not permitted to speak loudly. We passed time by sharing poetry and fairy tales with one another through whispers. In solitary cells, I made life tolerable by walking back and forth, and doing exercises. The torture chamber was in the same ward. We could hear screams all the time.

The situation was different in the central jail. Up to 400 prisoners used to live in three wards. The prison yard was open to all from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., where guards moved among us controlling our actions. They were trained to be extremely cruel with prisoners. We were prohibited any kind of natural human interaction: shaking hands, embracing each other, singing, dancing, and the like. A simple disregard of these rules invited corporal punishment from prison authorities.

Despite ideological differences, political prisoners maintained a high level of unity vis-à-vis police. We shared money, food and clothes brought by families in their weekly visits. We could purchase items from the

prison's small store and cook supplementary food. We were allowed to read certain books individually or with another jail-mate. While learning French, I used to teach English, political economy, history and philosophy. Throughout these years, I boosted my morale by doing regular exercises and maintaining a very friendly relationship with my jail-mates.

I found it highly unjust that the regime kept a large number of helpless prisoners in a state of uncertainty, instability or being taken for granted. It is "the most tormenting state of human life in which the victims lose themselves and suffer endlessly" (Mossallanejad, 2005, p. 193). For sixteen months, the regime used its fortified prison to keep me and hundreds of other prisoners with no communication with the outside world. This was a tactic to make the whole world forget about us. Every now and then, we moved from one extreme to the other – from hope to absolute hopelessness. With any noise, I used to jump and get ready for going under torture. I still suffer from the impact of this gross injustice.

While under torture in a public cell in the notorious Evin jail, I raised the following question to my cell mates who were also under torture and interrogation: "what kind of justice should we impose on our torturers if we ascend to political power?" Unfortunately, the majority of my friends prescribed torture as a means of defending the revolution against counter-revolutionary thugs. The memory of this conversation remained with me for years that followed and provided me with food for thought.

Eventually, President Carter came to power in the United States of America and put pressure on the Shah of Iran to release certain political prisoners. I fell into this category and was allowed to go free. But my troubles did not end with my release. I felt as if I had been transferred from the small prison of a cell to the larger prison of a police state. I was terrified of being arrested again and felt as if a shadow followed me everywhere. Finding work was impossible, as any kind of job required a security clearance, which was routinely denied to former political prisoners. For all of these reasons I decided to escape to India, where I registered for a doctoral program. It was not until after the Shah was overthrown that I returned to Iran.

The society I found when I returned home was very different from the one I had left behind. There was much upheaval and the religious fundamentalists had by that point gained a near monopoly on political power. They did not believe in the democratic process and I suddenly found myself persecuted by my former friends from prison who now occupied important positions in government. Often I had to change locations four or five times each day to evade capture and once spent a night hiding out on a battlefield with bullets flying all around.

Life was impossible in such circumstances and I fled Iran again, this time seeking refuge in Turkey. If things were difficult back home, they were certainly not easy in Turkey either, particularly for an alien with no residence permit. This feeling of living under constant threat became part of my experience and followed me for many years to come. Soon I left Turkey and sought refuge in various European countries, eventually returning to India, where I continued my studies.

The situation in India was far from stable, however. I discovered that the Iranian *Hezbollah* had organized in the country and were busy persecuting political refugees such as myself. Many of my friends were beaten and two were killed when they were attacked by an angry mob. While all this was going on, my son was killed in an accident. Still grieving and in shock, my wife and I decided to leave for Canada. We arrived in Montreal on February 12, 1985 and applied for refugee status.

It was at this stage that I felt the injustice of forced migration. I found exile to be one of the bitterest experiences in human life. It is a permanent separation between you and your native place. It is a cruel parting between human persons and their loved ones. It is the paralyzing sadness of estrangement. It is not an exaggeration if we compare exile to death that deprives the victim of the support of culture, family and homeland. The bitterness of permanent homelessness inspired me to explore other components of global justice: the right to asylum and the right to return to one's homeland.

Let me admit that as a devastated refugee in Canada, I experienced tremendous hardship on the one hand and unbelievable grassroots generosity on the other. After several years of marginalizing and discrimination-laden work experiences, I finally found employment where I can work for and with refugees and traumatized people. I am delighted that at the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT), I have found my full identity as a human rights activist, a refugee, a survivor of torture, an educator and a social justice worker. My long odyssey has taught me to have a holistic approach to the ideal of justice that covers both individuals and society. Justice, in my opinion, should be combined with the empowerment of victims on the one hand and reforming perpetrators on the other. Today, I reject the concept of retributive justice. I agree with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that the "old law about an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind" (Allen, 2003). I do not attach any merit to human suffering, even if it is a means of God's trial. Life is an end to itself. We must take the moment and enjoy life as much as possible and make it enjoyable for our fellow human beings.

For me, justice means human rights in all its facets. Despite many

achievements through international conventions, there are still many challenges to be faced before succeeding to bring about justice to today's disarrayed world. There is a gap between ratification and implementation. Human rights are being violated in almost all countries of the world to varying degrees. All kinds of torture continue to be perpetrated around the globe. The right to freedom of movement internationally is not even being discussed at the UN. Aboriginal rights are under threat and there is no effective international action to counter this. Since the destruction of the Berlin Wall, western countries have built new "walls" against refugees and uprooted people. Millions remain oppressed and enslaved. The problem of impunity of torturers and war criminals has remained unaddressed. Children suffer from abject poverty and a myriad of man-made evils. There is hardly any link between civil and political rights on the one hand and economic, social and cultural rights on the other. There is inadequate attention to the right for development. Exploitation remains a grave injustice at the global level. Transnational corporations continue to plunder the human and natural resources of all countries. Inequality of wealth and well-being has never been as high as today. Unbridled global capitalism has reduced our once beautiful planet to an inferno. We are heading towards an impending environmental catastrophe. The UN human rights system has failed to prevent war and genocide. Human rights workers have remained unprotected.

The prevalence of injustice and human rights violations in today's world speaks to the need for indefatigable endeavours to achieve justice. Justice, however, is an open-ended ideal. Achievement in one area will accentuate the need for progress in another area. The UN human rights system and other intergovernmental mechanisms have their own limitations. There is an urgent need for the creation of a global movement for justice and peace with direct involvement of the peoples and grassroots' organizations in countries of the South. I hope a day will come when we all raise our voices in a battle-cry of global solidarity to ensure the implementation of the natural, indivisible and universal rights of humankind.

I would like to end by making a few remarks about the idea of forgiveness that is a part of any discourse about justice. In my opinion, justice should consider correction, deterrence, rehabilitation, reformation, reparation and cure as its ultimate objectives. These objectives are accompanied with the ultimate idea of forgiveness, extended even to the perpetrators of heinous crimes, both at the individual and social levels. Forgiveness, however, should come from survivors and must be attached to certain conditions. The perpetrators should show their sincere efforts

to overcome their normal sense of denial and expose their past vices in all dimensions. This is the main purpose of many truth and reconciliation commissions that are active in some countries in the course of transitional justice. Perpetrators must also show that they are willing to pay their debt to their victims and to the society as a whole.

Finally, I would like to reiterate my full agreement with the Nobel Prize Laureate, Wole Soyinka (1999, p. 98), that “*capacity to forgive [an] enemy is based on love, at least a certain doctrine of love*”. Loving the enemy has a powerful healing impact both on victims and on the entire society. Love is of universal power.

ENDNOTES

- * This article is prepared with a special contribution from my daughter, Dorna Mossallanejad.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ezat Mossallanejed holds a Ph.D. degree in Political Economy. In Toronto, he has worked as a Youth Counsellor with St. Christopher House and as Director of the Jesuit Refugee Service-Canada. At present, he works as a full-time counsellor and Policy Analyst with the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT). He is currently on the Editorial Board of the *Refugee Update* and the board of the Canadian Centre for International Justice (CCIJ). He has published four books and more than 150 articles in Persian, as well as two books and 35 articles in English. He has worked with several UN bodies in connection with refugee protection and the eradication of torture. In his quest to protect refugees and survivors of torture, Ezat has travelled to different countries including the United States, Mexico, Rwanda, Switzerland, Austria, Australia, Nigeria, Uganda, Thailand, India and Cyprus. His book, *Torture in the Age of Fear*, was published in September 2005 (Seraphim Editions).

Reflections of an Iranian Political Prisoner

Minoo Homily

It is said that childhood is the most pleasant stage of human life. As a child, you play and enjoy your life without bothering about society and family responsibilities. This is true for those who live in peace and are free from poverty and discrimination. The bitter realities of life forced me to experience adulthood as a little girl. I have come from a middle class family in the city of Sanadaj located in the Iranian section of Kurdistan. We have been discriminated against in Iran due to our Kurdish ethnicity and due to our religion as Sunni Moslems. Kurdish people have always been suppressed at the hands of various dictatorial regimes.

I felt gross injustice at a very tender age when I saw extremely rich persons in my neighbourhood living side by side with the majority of people who lived under abject poverty. I never forgot when the mother of my playmate committed suicide by burning herself for no other reason than the poverty she experienced. She could not tolerate humiliation and starvation anymore. I instinctually sought justice by crying for this poor mother and extending my helping hands to her daughter. I pleaded with my mother to adopt her.

Simultaneously, I felt injustice at the family level. As a girl, I was expected to observe certain behavioural rules. I was not allowed to laugh loudly. While I was allowed to play with boys as a little girl, I was prohibited from continuing playing with boys at the age of twelve. There was an over-obsession about protecting the virginity of girls by each and every family. A girl who used to go to her husband's house without virginity was at risk of being killed by her male family members. I could not jump or eat pickles because these could presumably affect my virginity. I was constantly blamed for anything that went wrong because I was a girl. Brothers used any excuse to beat sisters. Violence was accepted as a corrective measure. Female genital mutilation was rampant in my region. I was lucky to have a liberal mother who prevented my grand mom to use this infamous atrocity against me. I could, however, see dozens of girls who experienced this practice and developed severe complications. Justice for me, at this time, was an immediate end to all sorts of violence and discriminations against women.

In early 1978, in an attempt to enjoy freedom and social justice, I revolted against the unjust and dictatorial regime of the Shah of Iran. A massive countrywide movement resulted in the downfall of the monarchist regime and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the first few months of the new government, there was a bloody conflict between armed forces of the Islamic regime and civilians in many parts of

the country, especially in Kurdistan. I was a teenager during this chaotic period. This tragic event had a great impact on my perceptions of justice.

When I go back to those days, I feel proud that I did not endorse the massive executions of those who were close to the previous regime including the Shah's Prime Minister, Mr. Hoveida. When I saw their mutilated corpses in newspapers, I was shocked and told friends that justice had nothing to do with execution. I had a strong feeling against the death penalty and retributive justice without naming them as such.

As an adolescent, I combined justice with the highest level of emotion for sick and vulnerable people. My compassion did not accept any boundary. When the new fundamentalist regime began bombarding Kurdistan and killing people, I chose to work as a paramedic in a hospital, trying to help injured civilians and to gather dead bodies from streets. I felt outright injustice from every cell of my body. A mighty army was bombarding the helpless civilian population with seven helicopters from the air and scores of ground rockets. Among dead bodies, I could identify close relatives, teachers and classmates. I tried my best to remain calm and continue with my services. I strongly believe that those who work for justice and freedom should continue their work with braveness and fortitude. I was assigned to carry life-saving medications for a secret hospital. My inexhaustible energy and the lightness of my body helped me to run fast. Bullets used to come from all sides, but somehow they never hit me.

How I could manage to survive these dangerous missions is a long story. But, after the city of Sanandaj was occupied by governmental forces, many doctors and nurses were arrested – some of them were executed. The new leader and the founder of Islamic Republic of Iran, Khomeini, sent the hanging judge Ayatollah Khalkhali to Sanandaj. In a dark bloody night of August 1979, he executed nine Kurdish youth from Sanandaj in a summary trial without providing them the opportunity to have a counsel. Among them were students, teachers, workers and a Sufi master. Two of them were youth living in my neighbourhood. The wave of executions continued and did not spare even medical care-givers including my relative Shahin Bavafa, supervisor of the "Shohada" hospital in Sanandaj. This reconfirmed my commitment against the death penalty as a gross and irreparable breach of the most fundamental principle of justice. Execution is a deliberate murder committed by the state in the name of justice. It takes the right of life away from a human person and is irreversible. It leads to revenge and violence. It has no impact on the prevention of crime. It is an instrument of power.

I could not be excluded from the flood of arrests, but fortunately they could not identify me as a paramedic who had been opposing the regime. I was released after two days. Months later, however, I was arrested again.

This time it was very serious because I was carrying a leaflet from an oppositionist group.

I was imprisoned for the first time when I was fifteen and the second time when I was sixteen. Altogether, I spent four years in jail. Going back to those horrible times is excruciatingly painful for me. My jail was more like Auschwitz. I actually spent a long time in solitary confinement and also in shared cells in the same prison. Different sorts of physical and mental tortures were and are the routine in prisons of Iran. We were whipped, we were deprived from visiting our families, we were kept in solitary for long periods, but that was not all.

In the course of transferring me from Esfahan jail to Sanandaj prison, the guard who was supervising my transfer sexually harassed me. He planned to rape me but was never able to carry it out. He used all sorts of threats and verbal abuses against me. Upon the transfer, I was incarcerated in the women's wards. We were deprived of the minimum standard of hygiene, health, medical treatment and nutrition. We did not have enough space to sleep. We felt suffocated due to the lack of air in our cells. For a year and a half, they threw me in a jail that was designated for dangerous criminals. They occasionally used this type of punishment against political prisoners. Some of these women suffered from venereal diseases. I had to share the bathroom and buckets with them. There was a strict discipline. Prison authorities decided about the time to sleep and to wake up. The regime's fanaticism did not allow women to run and do exercise. Guards had been recruited from declassed hoodlums, religious hooligans, vagabonds, and loafers. Most of them, in my view, suffered from multiple psychological problems. They underwent ongoing brainwashing. If they showed any mercy, they would be replaced immediately. Among us there was a group of prisoners who had been brainwashed to act as "repentants". They collaborated with torturers and some of them participated in the execution of their jail-mates. This was based on the Islamic idea of repentance: to be penitent and compensate for sins presumably committed in the past.

Describing the horror of the situation is not easy. I witnessed many of my cellmates being taken for execution. The executioners would sometimes force us to witness the massacre of political prisoners in the courtyard of the prison and I will never forget their devilish laughter while they washed the blood from the ground. When they took my friends for execution, I felt that they were killing a part of me. I had a feeling as if my heart was being taken out of my chest. It is difficult to lose somebody who has lived with you in the same cell under horrible conditions for lengthy periods of time. Victims normally held the highest standards of morality. Most of them were adolescents. They were killed due to their political opinions.

Let me briefly discuss the life of Fazilat Darayi, who is known to be one of the greatest soldiers of freedom. She was only eighteen when they

executed her. She was totally innocent and was not engaged in any sort of armed activity against the government. They killed her just for her beliefs. She could have saved her life if she had abided by the will of the Islamic regime and rejected her beliefs. But she resisted up to the very last moment, never letting go of her loving ideals and proclaiming this love. She was a heroine, yet she was only one of the thousands of women who fought for freedom and gave their lives for a better tomorrow.

For those who survive, the problems of political prisoners do not stop after their release. A shadow always follows you and at any time you may be arrested again. They exclude you from nourishment of the community because the government deprives you from taking part in social life and this may force you to experience abusive relationships.

In my situation, after years in prison, I became stuck in an abusive marriage. My adolescence had been spent with the smell of blood, prison and torture, execution and gunpowder, which transformed me into a rough personality. Consequently, after the prison, I was somewhat immature in my natural instincts and regarding the relationship between man and woman.

This inexperience put me in another prison named marriage, for my marriage was the fruit of a hasty decision without adequate knowledge about my husband or about any man at all. A chauvinist traditional man was now my new warden and he wasted additional years of my life by beating, harassing and humiliating me. More painfully, the rules and laws of the society supported this man and not me. Therefore I had no choice but to take my little child and escape from the country. Any time I complained to the family court, the judge did not provide me with any kind of legal protection due to being a woman, a Kurd, a person coming from a family belonging to a religious minority and being an ex-political prisoner. I was neither given the right to divorce nor the right to have the custody of my child. The judge even advised my husband to beat me or convert me to the Shia sect of Islam by force. "Beat her", he said, "in a way that it does not leave any scar". This led me to connect the idea of justice to the fundamental rights of humankind including women's rights, children's rights, as well as the rights of national and religious minorities.

Some time later, I escaped my new prison via human smugglers. Having a little daughter, being chased by a lunatic and violent husband, having no passport and being a former political prisoner made my escape a dangerous, breath-taking venture. I was facing the immediate danger of being caught by border police either in Iran or in Turkey. But I made it and once I arrived in Turkey I went to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that is mandated to protect asylum-seekers. I applied for refugee status.

Unfortunately, with great disappointment my first application with the

UNHCR was unsuccessful. I then decided to get support from opposition political parties and human rights organizations. They supported me by holding international campaigns over my refugee status and it worked! The UNHCR was finally forced to re-open my case and to give me my very basic right of being accepted as a refugee. This episode introduced another concept of justice to me: the fundamental right of each and every human person on this planet to seek asylum in other countries when persecuted at home.

In fact, the hardships I went through during that difficult and disastrous time in Turkey instilled within me a commitment that compelled me to engage in activities to support all Iranian asylum seekers. I volunteered to advise them about asylum claims, write letters of support and escort them to relevant offices. I specifically focused on refugee women. There are many asylum seekers now in Turkey in exactly the same situation in which I was trapped or even worse. There are journalists, authors and writers, students, and activists not being heard by the UNHCR. They are in a very fragile situation and could face the danger of deportation at any moment. Moreover, some refugees, despite being accepted by the UNHCR, cannot leave Turkey because of the government. This specific group of Iranian refugees including women and children, entered Turkey from northern Iraq, and they have been in this hard situation for years and years with no end. I am presently working towards their protection.

When I go back to the root causes of my imprisonment and torture, I state with no hesitation that the Iranian regime is genocidal. As a Kurdish woman, I have witnessed the systemic attempt of the regime to wipe out the entire Kurdish population. The same policy is followed against other ethnic and religious minorities of Iran. Everyone is aware that the Islamic regime of Iran has committed mass murder. The Islamic regime committed group-executions, and it has been executing thousands of political prisoners who had actually been sentenced to prison and not to death. Many of these victims have been buried in mass graves.

It should not be forgotten that at the very foundation of the religious tyranny in Iran is the hatred of women, and the yearning to humiliate and abuse them. To understand the misogyny of the regime we need to go back to 1979 when the people of Iran revolted against the Shah. They revolted because they were discounted and dissatisfied. Under the Shah's regime, women had only a small part of their rights, like freedom to wear what they wished. People revolted in order to improve the unjust economic, political and social conditions of the country. Revenues coming from oil were appropriated by a few aristocratic families at the cost of mass poverty. In slums and shanty towns, hundreds of people suffered from homelessness and malnutrition. People knew about Europe and felt they deserved a free life. Once powerful countries decided to strengthen the

opposition against the Islamic regime, women were the pioneers of this opposition. In the modern history of Iran, women's movements for their rights have always contributed to general political movements against tyranny. Women started to defy the new regime in Iran from the first days after the revolution, and they stated that "We didn't make this revolution to go backwards".

This objection of women in addition to the ideological mindset of the present theocratic regime caused the attack on women and all the defenders of liberty in Iran. Although the ideology of the Islamic regime is anti-feminine, this is not the only reason causing the suppression of women. The ruling clerics do this also for the sake of their political benefits. They can maintain their political power by sticking to an outmoded culture of Islamic patriarchy. Women's movements will bring modernity and pluralism that are in conflict with the very foundation of the regime. There are many Moslem governments in the world. However, they do not all violate women's rights to this extent because their political situation is different.

Given the present situation, it is difficult to forecast what the future of Iran holds. There is surely growing sentiment toward freedom and people are fighting for it. The experience of Iraq, however, shows that people should achieve liberty on their own. Any sort of help from people of other countries should be aimed at strengthening opposition to the medieval regime. A military attack by an outside superpower could result in fortifying the basis of the Islamic regime because it provides the government with an excuse to suppress the opposition and deceive people in the name of fighting foreign enemies.

There is definitely a path toward freedom. The present outmoded regime of Iran should be taken over by the decisive political action of the Iranian people, and its constitution and rules should be destroyed to the last particle. In its ruins a democratic system should be established. People will not be content with less than this and they are fighting for their salvation. Our people need to be helped.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Minoo Homily was born in the Kurdistan region of Iran. She is a university graduate in Natural Geography. She spent four years in prison in Iran due to her political and humanitarian activities. At present, she works as a refugee and community activist in Toronto. She is also a writer and a women's advocate, writing in both Farsi and English.

Justice Beyond My Ordeal

Anahita Rahmanizadeh

I was around eighteen when I grasped the idea of justice. At that time, the prevalence of inequality, lawlessness and tyranny in my country of origin, Iran, provided me with incentive to think about what a just society should be. I developed the vision of a social order in which there would be equal opportunity for all and people could enjoy the fruit of their labour. I was particularly keen to further the development of women's rights. I was annoyed when I observed gross injustices against women at the familial level and in the working world. I could see how my brother, as a man, received more respect despite working less for the family.

In an attempt to continue with my education, I travelled to the United States in 1977. I learned a lot by seeing a new society and an entirely different culture. I joined a radical movement of Iranian students working against injustice in Iran through advocacy, research, publications, demonstrations and public awareness campaigns. I was fascinated by the movement due to its just and humanitarian approach to women. I was respected as a woman and I did not feel that men looked at me as a sex object. I was given heavy responsibilities with rights equal to those of men. At this time, I made a connection between gender equality and justice. I realized that the implementation of justice would be impossible without the implementation of gender justice. There is no doubt that women are half of humanity and play a key role in all aspects of social life. I believe that depriving women of their rights is depriving society from freedom and progress. I became an advocate of democracy and women's rights. Furthermore, I came to the understanding that even if people get some achievements in terms of social justice tyrannical regimes can easily take them away. Justice is impossible without people's participation in deciding their destinies. A democratic government recognizes the right of oppositional groups for criticism. Society can correct itself in terms of justice when there are challenges from opposition.

While living in the U.S., I was acquainted with a gentleman called Behrooz. Our relationship turned into a loving attachment and we decided to marry in the future. Upon my return to Iran in 1979, I found a society ruled by a highly unjust, fanatical and repressive government. Women had a crucial role in terminating the monarchist rule, struggling against the Shah's dictatorship by being at the forefront of all demonstrations, strikes and movements for civil liberties. They were, unfortunately, the first group to be brutally suppressed by the new clerical regime. The regime forced women, even little four-year-old girls, to wear veils and scarves. Polygamy was allowed, divorce was declared a man's right, women were prohibited from travelling alone and children's custody was given

to fathers. A myriad of medieval discriminative laws and practices were imposed on women. Women's subordinate condition was a microcosm of the overall situation in Iran. The government's oppression extended to workers, intellectuals, students, religious minorities and ethnic groups. Faced with an overall context of injustice, I decided to raise my voice.

I joined a leftist group and started organizing workers, women and intellectuals against the regime. Fighting against a tyrannical government that had the support of fanatical people was extremely risky. I was ready to accept the risk, but I was not ready to accept discrimination within our own small group. We had all come from a patriarchal and highly traditional society. Men occupied leadership roles in our small group. They undermined women and gave us fewer responsibilities. The main challenge was not only to struggle against a tyrannical regime, but also against male domination among our progressive comrades. We accomplished this through constant and constructive criticism, taking on more responsibilities and outright rejection of anything we found to be against women's rights. Unfortunately, I did not have then the gender awareness I have now.

In 1982, I married my comrade Behrooz Fathi. He was a mechanical engineer with an American degree. He had a heavy responsibility in the group and was beloved by co-workers with whom he worked in different factories. He was a very thoughtful and humble person. We maintained a highly passionate and loving relationship during our very short life together.

On a hot summer day in September 1983 we traveled together to rent a house outside Tehran, as the regime had found out about our whereabouts in the capital. After we passed a checkpoint on the highway heading from Tehran to Karaj, two army cars began to chase us. One of the cars turned in front of our car and forced Behrooz to stop the car suddenly. Many armed men wearing dark green military style uniforms surrounded our car, pointing their guns at us. One of them shouted at us to get out the car. I felt as if I was watching the whole thing happen to someone else. I could not believe that it was happening to us. We stepped out of the car and put our hands on our heads. They demanded our identification. We gave them our fraudulent identification and then they separated us. Behrooz was in one car and I was in another. The guard came back to me. "You fools", he said, "cannot fool me. You are Anahita". I denied it, but it was of no use. They had already identified us. It was September 11, 1983 at 11:00 a.m. – I was twenty-five years old and Behrooz was thirty.

As we stood there waiting, many people stared at us from their cars. I could see a trace of sympathy in some of their eyes, but most people passed by without even looking up. I wanted to cry out to them, "Hey

people, I have been arrested and will probably be executed. Please don't look away". But, I stood there quietly.

They covered our eyes with blindfolds and Behrooz's wrists were handcuffed. They forced us to sit in the car bent at the waist so that our heads were pointed towards the floor. We knew that we were headed towards the notorious Iranian jail Evin, one of the biggest prisons in the world. Evin was built in partnership with Israel and the CIA during the Shah regime. Khomeini's regime had expanded it. No one spoke a word for the whole journey. A deep silence ensued. I could hear only the noise of the traffic. When we entered Evin, I was brought to the female section. A female pasdar searched me, took my bag and gave me a dark blue chador (veil). When we passed the main door, we were put in the car again. It stopped in less than two minutes. Somebody guided me into a place that later I found out was called Ward 209 – a ward for newly arrested prisoners.

I was dragged into the torture room, below Ward 209. If I looked out the bottom of the blindfold, I could see three pairs of legs. I could imagine the faces of these men – their bearded, angry faces. I saw many different sizes of cables, from thick to thin, on the ground. There were bloody footprints everywhere. It seemed to me that justice was being mutilated at the hands of cruel torturers. The room was dimly lit by a small lamp. I felt paralyzed by fear. The strong stench of blood made me dizzy.

In the middle of the room, there was a bed. A man was being flogged. He was screaming loudly. A voice said to him, "shut up, get up, get out of the room and wait in the hallway". I could see his feet as the prisoner tried to get up. I wondered if he was going to be able to walk. Eventually, he was able to move and walked towards the door, dragging his bloody feet on the floor.

One of the men told me: "Take off your socks and lie down on your belly on the bed". I was not sure they knew my identity; for me, it was very important to continue to deny that I was Anahita. I hoped to fool them by playing the role of a woman who was very scared and constantly called her mother. One of the men tied my hands to the metal head board. He tied them so tightly that I could feel the ropes bruising my wrists. After my ankles were tied to the bed, a dirty, grey blanket was thrown over my body and one of the men sat on my head. I heard the sharp whistle of a cable cut the air and it landed on the soles of my feet. Pain. The pain was excruciating. I felt a molten pole was put on my sole. Flashes were running through my brain. I cannot compare it with anything or any other kind of pain. All my body was contracted. I was sweating, and also because of the blanket and the heavy body on my head, I could not breathe. I tried to push the heavy body off my head but it was impossible.

Suddenly everything went dark. I began to lose consciousness.

When I opened my eyes, I was alone in the room. The blanket had been removed and my whole body was dripping with water. I laid on the bed waiting. My feet were throbbing with pain. I shivered uncontrollably. After a while, my interrogator returned with another prisoner. It was a man who had been beaten severely. His clothes were torn and there were bloody bandages on his feet. I knew him; he was one of my colleagues. I heard the interrogator asking him, "Is this Anahita?" He refused to look at me but I heard his answer, "Yes, she is".

As I lay there on the bed, I did not know how to react. I was shocked that he had betrayed me and yet, I had felt the pain of torture myself and so felt compassion for what he had endured. As I lay there, I was not sure which pain was more acute, the physical or the emotional pain that I was feeling. They untied my hands and let me get up. When I saw my feet, I could not believe my eyes. My feet had swollen to the size of a pillow.

They brought me to a cell that night. The cell did not have a roof; the ceiling was covered with criss-crossed ropes and I could see the sky. I could hear the sound of the guard's feet when he was walking up and down the roof of the ward. I could also hear the sound of an interrogator's feet who was running happily and saying to others, "at last we arrested Behrooz and Anahita".

I was exhausted but I could not sleep. I lay on the concrete floor. My feet were bruised, throbbing with pain. And, yet I knew that the torture was not over. They would try to break me again and tomorrow would be a worse day than today had been. I was also thinking about my husband. I was worried about him. I began to have doubts: "Can I resist the torture? Am I strong enough?" I was scared. The thought of betraying my comrades was terrible. I would rather die than betray people whom I loved. I looked for something, anything in the cell that could help me to kill myself – a small piece of glass, a rope – but the cell was completely empty. I knew that I would need to be stronger than I had ever been before.

I began to walk on my bruised feet. I knew that by walking I could reduce the swelling. If I could do this perhaps the torture would be easier to bear. As I walked, my mind was filled with thoughts: "Are my comrades okay? Have they heard about our arrest? Have they moved their location so that they are safe?" I looked up and thought that I saw something written on the wall of my cell. I looked more closely and read a sentence scratched into the wall: "This moment will pass".

As long as I live, I will never forget that moment and those four small words on that prison cell. Those words gave me a strange sort of power. I came to know that after all there was an end to everything. The torturers would not be able to torture me forever. Even if they killed me, this would

be an ultimate relief. This new awareness acted as a ray of hope amidst the darkness. It re-energized me and boosted my morale. I felt internally rich. Yes, my plight would be a temporary phenomenon and the physical and emotional assaults that I was facing would pass sooner rather than later. Life would finally become triumphant. It was like oxygen running into my brain. I felt a sense of hope. Yes, this would pass, but the important thing was to figure out how this situation would pass.

After that, I was able to sleep. I woke up when I heard the small window in my door open. Through my chador I could see two men. They watched me for a while and then one of them said, “see how relaxed she is now in her sleep. She is relaxed because she doesn’t know what we will do to her tomorrow”. They laughed and closed the window.

At the time that I was being tortured, I did not realize what an important experience it was for me. What I learned from the pain was important. I learned that the inner strength of human beings is tremendous and even under terrible situations, they can resist. As I lay in my cell that first night with my eyes closed, listening to the words of my interrogators, I decided to be just to myself. The only way for me to overcome their denial of justice was to resist. I thought to myself, “you can kill me but you can’t break me and I will change your laughter to crying with my resistance”.

Resistance to me meant protection of my friends who were active outside by not providing any information to interrogators. It was also important not to show weakness by accepting to collaborate or obeying prison rules. They used all kinds of tricks to make us subservient. They forced prisoners to pray five times a day and abstain from sharing information with cellmates. They spared no time to take away our humanity. We had no right to help a sick prisoner, to move with other prisoners, to smile or to show a semblance of happiness. I tried my best to stick to my human nature and give meaning to my life.

The next morning I got up very early. While I was walking back and forth across my cell, the door opened. A guard handed me a filthy red plastic cup of tea, a very small and dry piece of cheese and a stale chunk of bread and he said “after breakfast, be ready for interrogation”.

I did not have an appetite. I could not consume anything except the tea. Even though, I knew it would be very hard, I was surprisingly relaxed. I was ready for anything. I decided to defeat my interrogators. The guard came back sooner than I expected and said, “put on your chador and blindfold; come out and follow me”. He led me down a long hallway and told me to sit on the floor.

While I was sitting on the floor, I tilted my head up until I could see underneath my blindfold. I saw a long corridor with many rooms. There were many other prisoners sitting on the floor. I also saw three prisoners

whose hands were tied with thick chains and fastened to the wall. One of them was groaning. Later, I discovered that this was a kind of torture. The torturer kept the prisoners chained to the wall for many days so that they were unable to sleep. Another prisoner was tied to the radiator and in his hands he held the Qur'an. He was reading the Qur'an loudly and hitting his head against the radiator. I could see that he had lost his mental capacities. I found it to be a sordid injustice to torture a person suffering from mental health problems. As I was looking at all of these things, I did not hear my guard coming down behind me. The next thing that I felt was his fist striking my head with huge force. He put his mouth right beside my ear and whispered, "If you raise your head again, I'll shatter it against the wall". A shudder went through my body. I could tell that he meant what he said.

I heard a woman screaming, "Forgive me I didn't know. For God's sake, don't execute me. Have compassion for me, for my children". A harsh voice answered her, "If you really loved your children, you wouldn't be a political activist, and instead you would be a simple housewife. Islam is very compassionate with believers, but not with unbelievers who fight against Allah and Islam". This seemed to me a medieval type of religious injustice. As I listened to her pleas, I wished I could talk to her to say "don't cry and don't beg for your life. There is no justice, there is no compassion. He can kill you and your children in this moment, without compunction". I heard a voice calling out my name very softly, telling me to follow him. I got up and followed his voice.

We went to a room down the hall and when I entered, he said "Sit down on the chair". I sat down on the chair. It was a chair with arms and a small table attached to it. He started to pace the floor behind my chair and began to speak to me. He said, "You are a poor, uneducated person who had to escape from war and support your family economically". When he said this, I knew that he had talked to the manager at the factory where I had worked. In order to get a job as a worker, to be involved in the worker's movement, I had told this story to the manager of the factory. Then my interrogator put paper and a pen on the table and said, "You see that we know every thing about you. Now write all the names and addresses of your colleagues. Don't mess with us, when I come back I will expect to see that you have written everything". I heard him leave the room.

I wondered what time it was and whether my husband had been tortured like I had been. He was so thin. I wondered if he could have resisted the torture. I felt sleepy. I was happy that I was left by myself so that I could have some silence. I put my head on the table and slept. I woke up when I felt a sharp pain on my head. My interrogator hit my

head again with his fist. He was holding a pen in his hand and when his fist hit my head, the sharp tip of the pen tore through my skin. A scream came out of my throat, "I have nothing to write".

"Get up, you need some more *tazir* (religious word for torture). When you receive *tazir*; you will tell us everything". Using a pen so that he did not have to touch me, he guided me toward the basement. He called somebody and explained my position in the organization, telling him that I refused to cooperate. As he spoke, he was mocking the *Shar'ia* court, pretending that he was giving evidence against me so that I could be punished with *tazir*. In this way, he showed that he was not bothering with their own Islamic laws and courts. It was an outright denial of any semblance of justice.

While I was sitting on the floor, a young man was brought out of the torture room into the hallway. He was short and thin. I saw this from under the blindfold. His feet were bloody. We were alone for a short time. He asked me, "Were you arrested recently?" I nodded. He continued, "Don't be afraid of them. They are much weaker than us. I was arrested two years ago but my real identity was only released recently. I know I will be executed very soon". Then he lifted one of his feet and asked me, "Should I put my bloody footprint on the wall?" Without waiting to hear my answer he put his foot on the wall. I showed him my praise by smiling. He was taken away very soon after this and I never saw him again. In the course of the year that passed, I always remembered his bloody footprint as a symbol of resistance against injustice. You put justice on the horizon when you negate its violations in the present.

I was sleepy. I did not want to lose an opportunity to sleep. I do not know how many minutes or hours passed. I woke up to the words of my torturer, "Ana, have you thought about it?" I responded, "There's nothing to think about".

"Go ahead and lie on the bed", he said. He tied my feet to the metal of the bed and then threw a dirty, grey blanket on me. He said, "Whenever you want to talk, raise your hands". He did not ask me any more questions and began to beat me. The pain was terrible. My teeth were clenched in pain. Sweat was pouring out of my body as though bucket after bucket of water had been poured on me. I shoved the blanket into my mouth and bit it as hard as I could. While they struck my feet, I saw sparks of lights behind my eyes. It was like electric shocks running through my body. I wanted to frustrate him so I did not scream. I thought to myself:

How weak he is. He has thrown me here and tied my body and is flogging me. I am not imprisoned by him, he is imprisoned by me. All he wanted was to break my morale and make me subservient.

By not achieving this sinister goal he had no choice but to feel humiliated. The most he can do to me is to beat me then kill me, but he can't break me. He is thinking he is strong because he arrested us but I know that he is digging his own grave.

I felt that I was serving justice by psychologically punishing this most unjust person standing beside me.

He started to become fatigued. He began to beat me on my back. He became like a mad man, crying, talking and hitting my whole body with his fists. I could tell that I was causing him to lose control. I was laying there in horrible pain, but I was content. I felt like I had power. I got internal strength by murmuring to myself: "they can break my bones, but not my spirit". Everything went dark as I lost consciousness.

He poured a bucket of water on my head. I did not have energy to move my body or my head. He left the room and after a short time he came back and began to flog me again. I could see my blood on the floor. He was spreading it around the room as he walked. The floor was covered with bloody footprints. It was afternoon before he untied my feet and said "Get up and run around the room". I could hardly get up. I tried leaning against the wall and began to walk around the room. The pain was terrible. There was dirt on the floor and as I walked on it, it caused me extreme pain. He began to whip my feet and said, "Faster, faster, run, run". I tried to go faster but I could not. I fell down and my *chador* fell from my head. As I lay on the ground, he continued to flog me but told me to cover my head. This was a sinister testimony of injustice mixed with hypocritical religious Puritanism.

Their horrible tortures lasted for three days. They prevented me from sleeping by chaining my hands to a hook in the wall and forcing me to stand upright the whole time. Those three nights were the longest and hardest of my life. The third morning when the torturer unlocked my hand, I fell down. He shouted, "Get up". I heard him but it sounded to me like his voice was coming from far away and I could not respond. He began to kick me but I could not even move my body. He kicked me harder but I did not move. He thought that I was unconscious and left me alone.

It seemed that I was in another state of being, far from this world. I do not know how long I remained like this but eventually somebody came and took me to my cell. I fell on the floor and slept immediately. I did not see anyone for two days. The guard would bring my meals but I did not move. On the third day, I opened my eyes and ate my breakfast. Afterwards, I started to walk around my small cell. I was looking for that small phrase of encouragement written on the wall. I read it and repeated

it several times to myself: *these moments will pass*. I was worried about Behrooz. I did not know what he was experiencing and had no idea how to contact him. I wondered if he was alive. When I thought about the way they tortured me, I wondered what they would have done to him because he was one of the leaders of our organization.

While I was walking, the door was opened and the guard said, “put on your blindfold and chador and then come out for interrogation”. I was brought into the corridor and sat down beside a closed door. Somebody was being tortured in the room. I could hear his screams. Then, the door was opened and I could see inside the room. The torturers had surrounded the man and kicked him with their feet. It was like a ball in a small field. The prisoner had stopped screaming; now he was only grunting with the pain. I caught a glimpse of the face of the man they were torturing. My heart felt like it had been stabbed when I realized that it was Behrooz. His whole body was covered with blood. I watched as his body fell like the trunk of a tree to the ground. I could not control myself. In a second I found myself in the middle of the room, trying to hold Behrooz, yelling out “You killed him, you murderers!” They jumped on me, threw me to the ground and began to kick me. They threw me out of the room and dragged me towards the stairs. One of them threw me on the bed and the other one started to whip me. I do not know if my screams and cries were due to my own pain or for Behrooz. When they left the room, tears continued to pour down my face. It was late at night when I was brought back to my cell.

Behrooz was a brilliant organizer with lots of connections and information about many people. For the rest of my life, I will continue to be proud of him; he resisted all techniques of intolerable torture and did it heroically. Within a month, they had murdered him. I received news of his resistance from some of my cellmates who had seen him during their torture and interrogation. A pregnant woman who became my cellmate later told me that she had seen Behrooz in the torture chamber. “He gave me”, she said, “all his food and empowered me with his courage and promoted my morale by his kind words”. I came to know about his execution after one year when my parents were allowed to see me for the first time.

I experienced the worst and most sordid types of injustice in the years that followed. They put me through the most torturous interrogations for around eighteen months before taking me to an inquisitional court blindfolded. I removed my blindfold and told the judge that I did not want to be tried with closed eyes. The judge, a clergyman called Nayeri, gazed at me with outrage. It was a summary trial, and he asked me only two questions:

Do you agree with your group's political views?
Do you believe in Islam?

He then accused me of being politically active in jail working with other prisoners. He told me that a heavy punishment was awaiting me. I had no lawyer and was not provided with any means to defend myself. The only person present in the court was my torturer, who was sitting behind me. I could not see him because I was not allowed to look back. I could, however, feel his presence due to his shadow and by the way the judge was staring at a specific point behind me. At the end of this sham trial that took less than ten minutes, I was blindfolded again and was pushed out of the courtroom.

Initially, they sentenced me to execution, commuted later to life imprisonment. Altogether, I spent eight years in jail. They released me due to international pressures following the massacre of political prisoners in 1988. Throughout those years, I felt doubly pressured as a prisoner and as a woman. Patriarchal prison authorities spared no time to humiliate us. As a woman, I was subjected to sexual harassment and gender related torture. I had to resist torture like other political prisoners as well. My torturers, whether male or female, hated women political activists. They insisted that women should be subservient as a wife and mother. Despite the difficulties of hearing such comments, I felt proud of myself as a woman. They did not lose any chance to make derogatory comments as follows: "you must be in the kitchen; give birth to children; you're involved in politics because of your husbands' or brothers' indoctrinations; some of you did it for the sake of finding a husband". As if this was not enough, the guards used to invade the jail in a sudden way and beat prisoners for trivial violations of the prison rules or even for no reason at all. We were not allowed to read together. We could not weave or make handicrafts. They made life highly tedious for us. They forced us to listen to the monotonous religious sermons and lamentation songs. They had brainwashed a number of prisoners and used them to torture us.

Imprisonment, bereavement, torture, degradation and harsh life: that was the price I paid for justice. I lived in a society full of injustice. I suffered in my journey for justice. We have not yet achieved justice, but one day we will do it. I strongly believe that my struggle has not been in vain. History is like a field: if we sow a good seed for justice it will produce fruit one day. I am happy that as a political prisoner, I contributed towards laying the foundation for a just society and as a woman for gender justice. Justice will come if all of us work for it.

Upon my release, I suffered in a society that had become extremely

patriarchal. I was stigmatized as a widow and as a non-believer. I finally escaped Iran in 2001. In my first country of asylum, Turkey, I had to face the challenge of living as an illegal alien while I applied for refugee status in Canada. I came to Canada as a government assisted refugee in 2003. I am happy that my struggle for justice was finally recognized, even if it was not in my country of origin. The Canadian tradition of hosting refugees is quite meaningful to me. Despite all its shortcomings such as racism, hidden sexism, lack of social security for women and xenophobia at workplaces, Canada provides me with a venue to continue with my struggle against injustice.

Years of imprisonment and exile have changed my idea of justice. From a young activist who supported violence against the enemy, I have matured into a woman who works towards the promotion of people's awareness about their rights and the best ways of obtaining them. Back in those days, I supported the death penalty against the enemies of the people. Today, I oppose the death penalty. I strongly believe that a justified goal needs justified means. The ruling class and the government of each country are responsible for the practice of violence and torture in their societies. When people do not have the legal tools to express their views under oppressive regimes, how can we expect them to protest and show their objections? It is through fighting or armed uprisings that opposition groups cry out loud that we are here and that we must be heard. The only way for abolishing violence and torture is the creation of a just system that respects every human being and listens to each and every voice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anahita Rahmanizadeh was born in Tehran, Iran. She successfully completed courses at George Brown College and received her diploma as a family counsellor. She is presently a third year student in Social Work at Ryerson University, Toronto. She works with the Iranian Women's Organization with the aim of empowering women in Canada.

A Personal Account of Torture, Justice and the Agony of Immigration

Krishnabahawan Karalapillai

I was born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka in 1957. There was peace and prosperity in those days and I enjoyed the loving family atmosphere of my childhood. I had the full support from my parents, two sisters and two brothers. At that point in my life, justice was practically the same as peace and security for me. I dreamt of living in a perfect society where no one intended to or could do harm. I believed in a just system where people collaborated enthusiastically and continuously with one another in all aspects of life. From my early childhood, I loved the great Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi and his concept of *ahimsa*. Gandhi advocated for absolute non-violence based on the belief in the sacredness of all living creatures. This principle prohibits not only any kind of physical injury to others, but also all forms of adverse or injurious words and deeds – vicious ideas, bad words, hatred, rudeness, dishonesty, and the like.

In order to contribute to the realization of peace and justice in an ideal society, I decided to become a medical doctor. I aspired to heal the physical, as well as the psychological wounds of my fellow human beings. My philosophy was that science and peace were directly connected. I finished my secondary school in Colombo and in September 1977, I left for the United Kingdom to continue my education.

In those days, tension between Singhalese and Tamils was escalating. While the Singhalese, who believe primarily in Buddhism, represent the majority of the Sri Lankan population, the Tamils, who are mainly Hindus, are considered a minority. For an extended time in my country's history, Tamils have been enslaved by Singhalese, used as cheap labour, and discriminated against in terms of education and work opportunities. Singhalese extremists have insisted on their distinct Aryan descent and have humiliated dark-skinned Tamils. The racism and oppression of Tamils has resulted in high levels of tension between the two communities. The situation has worsened due to the government's lack of significant action against Singhalese extremists while heavily suppressing any kind of opposition by Tamils.

This conflict was extremely costly for my family. In 1980, while I was studying in the United Kingdom, I received the sad news that Singhalese extremists had burned my beloved father alive. I returned to Sri Lanka and participated in my father's funeral services. When I tried to return to the United Kingdom, government officials in Colombo detained me at the Bandaranaike Airport. There were no grounds for my detention except

for the fact that I belonged to the Tamil minority. It was frustrating that despite the fact that there was no ground whatsoever for my detention, they insisted that I was passing information to Tamil Tigers from London, England.

I was detained for about ten days in a small suffocating cell with inadequate air to breath. It felt like a grave except for the fact that the light was on twenty-four hours a day. Its continuous glow disturbed my eyes to the point that I could no longer bear it. I have never forgotten the bad memories of those gloomy days. They put iron poles between my fingers and beat my legs frequently. They hung me upside down, they penetrated a coarse stick into my rectum and they deprived me from sleeping. They spared no time in using foul language against me. They degraded me by calling me a “dirty terrorist”. They interrogated me daily with torture for hours, sometimes from early evening until late in the morning. They threatened that they would kill me. Terror, violence and torture did not start on September 11, 2001. There have been offensives and atrocities aimed at Tamils and other disfranchised communities going back into the 1970s and 1980s.

Despite prison officials finding out about my absolute adherence to the principle of peace and non-violence, they refused to release me until my sister found a lawyer. Once I was released, I returned to England where I thought a lot about justice. I realized that justice should be implemented both at the individual and societal levels. I connected justice with human rights, specifically the rights of minorities for autonomy or self-determination. I believe in the Dalai Lama and I admire the way he has led a long-term non-violent struggle for the autonomy of the Tibetan people. I am certain that justice is harmony among people of different faiths and different ethnic backgrounds. Freedom of worship, I argue, is a main component of justice. Faith provides survivors with patience and hope to cope with their trauma. Spirituality acts as relief when you are involved in the totality of existence and transcend beyond everything that is personal. This is the core lesson we can learn from all religions. However, it becomes problematic when we insist on the truthfulness of our faith and falseness of others. This sets religions against religions and people against people. We need to respect pluralism. When there is agreement, cooperation and collaboration, people get along easily and there is no discrimination. Under those conditions if there is ever any form of injustice, freedom of conscience and expression provides people with the opportunity to raise their voices.

After completing part of my studies in England, I traveled to Montréal, Canada in 1981. I worked in a restaurant for some time and then went to Pennsylvania where I was a factory employee for two years. While

in Pennsylvania, I came to know about the war between Singhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka that broke out in July 1983 which has since continued with all sorts of sordid atrocities committed by both sides. In fact, both parties have resorted to violence, committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. More than 100,000 people have been killed as a result of the war. Regardless of the motives behind it, war is unjust. It is the cruellest absurdity in human life. I advocate for its immediate end. I believe that in the course of war, all sorts of unjust behaviours such as gross atrocities, hatred, and torture are justified in the name of doing justice to one's enemies. It is only during the peacetime that we are able to extend our compassion to all members of the human family regardless of differences. Peace itself is the ultimate ideal of all human beings. It is therefore just and humanitarian.

The war delivered a personal blow to me as I could not return to my country of origin without risking my life. This realization developed my idea of justice further. I came to treasure the right to citizenship as a crucial component of justice. You fully appreciate the importance of citizenship when you lose it. Essentially, citizenship is official membership in a certain country. Such membership entitles an individual to certain rights; it is "*the right to have rights*". Stateless people, of course, are incapable of enjoying these rights.

There are certain dates that I will never forget. I returned to Canada on October 21, 1987 and applied for refugee status in Fort Erie, Ontario. I never imagined migration would bring gross injustice in my life. I was kept in a distressful limbo for seven years until I was accepted as a Convention refugee on July 21, 2004. At this time I came to know about an important element of justice: the right to asylum. I feel that we are all human beings sharing the same planet. We need to protect one another when it comes to persecution and torture. Article 14 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights considers the right to asylum a part of everyone's fundamental right. Life is so unpredictable that whoever we are we may need immediate protection at anytime. Global justice necessitates that we provide refuge to anyone who is in need.

Following my acceptance as a Convention refugee in July 2004, I applied for permanent resident status in Canada. I have been languishing in a horrible limbo since then due to the fact that at one point I was charged by police. As is the case with other survivors of torture, this can be attributed to my severe mental health condition. Due to the trauma of my past, I have been diagnosed as a person suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. Upon my arrival in Canada, I became a client of the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT).¹ I have shared my hopes, despairs, and fears of returning to Sri Lanka with the CCVT counsellors who have mobilized their resources to improve my coping skills and help me in my rehabilitation process as a survivor of torture, war and trauma.

Despite their continuous support, I still suffer from both physical and psychological after-effects of the various torture techniques and other cruel, inhumane and degrading treatments that I experienced. For the last twenty-two years, I have been living not only with a terrible psychological condition but also with the emotionally draining rollercoaster of fear and hope. Due to my uncertain future, I have to take different pills that help me deal with nightmares, lack of concentration and hyper-vigilance. A mere knock on the door startles me and I can become overwhelmed with dread because I fear that someone has come to send me back to torture and death in Sri Lanka. Despite my disability and serious illness, I do volunteer with the Hindu Cultural Society, and Scarborough Gurudwara – a Sikh and Hindu temple – and the Red Cross.

It is unjust that the Canadian government keeps a disabled and extremely sick person like me in a state of limbo between hope and despair for such a long time. This is a gross injustice that I share with hundreds of other people in the same situation. Like them, I am suffering in silence as I live a fruitless life while I wait for my landed immigrant status. Without a landed immigrant status, there is hardly any access to meaningful work, education, language courses, bank loans, business opportunities and social benefits such as full health coverage. As a result, we are detached from Canadian society and are vulnerable to further exploitation, human rights violations and emotional torment.

The problem is that for the last twenty-five years, the Canadian immigration system has developed a tendency towards keeping refugees in limbo. This is due to gaps in immigration policies and legislation, heavy bureaucracy and the discretionary powers of immigration officers who determine whether a ‘non-citizen’ poses a risk to national security or not.² There is no independent judicial guarantee and very limited accountability. Anybody who applies for landed immigrant status in Canada goes through a security check. However, this procedure can take years, particularly for refugees coming from certain countries. It is upsetting and problematic that there is a total lack of accessibility to any immigration or security officer before and after a decision of inadmissibility. There is a total absence of face-to-face contact between refugees and Immigration officials. Everything is done by paper-screening in the small city of Vegreville, Alberta, at local offices of Citizenship and Immigration Canada or in visa posts overseas. Such an arrangement is inevitably filled with mistakes and misplacements of files and unjustified red tape. This depersonalized process also results in a lack of attention to special individual needs and emergency situations. As it stands, there is hardly any consideration of human rights in the immigration process, a stated pillar upon which the system is built.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The CCVT offers its clients holistic services such as counselling, art therapy and specialized medical and legal support with the aim of promoting their coping capacity to withstand after-effects of torture.
- ² This situation is more complex when the applicant has a criminal record either in Canada or overseas, even if it is for a minor offence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Krishnabahawan Karalapillai was born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. He came to Toronto in 1987 and has been living in Immigration limbo since then. At present, he works as a volunteer in a Sikh and in a Hindu temple.

My Journey from Torture to Harmony

Daniel

It was March nineteen eighty-something.¹ It was election day² and my friend Susan and I had gone out to take some pictures to make a documentary on the election events in El Salvador. I was an art student at the National University of El Salvador, so, naturally, I carried my sketch book with me everywhere I went. As we were walking by the University we were stopped by a group of soldiers who asked us where we were going and what were we doing. We said we were just taking pictures.

The soldier in charge said, “pictures of what?” We said “just pictures of the election activities. We wanted to make a documentary on how elections worked in El Salvador”. He said, “are you sure?” I said, “yeah”. He then asked, “What do you have in your bag?” I said, “My sketch book”. He took the bag, dropped it and started going through my book page by page. I do not remember what I had in the book but as he was looking through the pages, he not only changed the tone of his voice when he came across one of the pictures, he also said, “What the fuck is this?” I responded, “It’s my sketch book”. “No, no, no, what the fuck is this drawing?” As I looked at the picture I wet myself out of fear. The drawing was of a blindfolded man on a chair with hands tied behind his back and a sign on top of his head that declared: “If Nicaragua triumphed so will El Salvador”.³ I felt a chill from my head to my toes. I knew I was in trouble. The soldier got upset and angry and took our cameras and said “you are a fucking communist”. I said “no, I’m a student of the arts”. He said, “Where have you seen this drawing before?” “Nowhere, I heard about it from others”, I answered. He then opened our cameras, took out the film and destroyed them. This was the beginning of my ordeal. The soldier called someone and in less than a minute, an unimaginable sea of green appeared before us, with countless soldiers surrounding us. A mini van with tinted windows showed up and he said “get in, keep your heads down”; he repeated aggressively “keep your heads down”. So they put us in a van and took us to a military base.

At the base, they put me in a prison cell where there were some soldiers pretending to be prisoners; they were undercover soldiers. They were asking me why I was there but I would not give any information or say anything. After about two hours, someone came and told us to get out. They put us back in the van with our heads down and they took us to another military base. As we arrived, because I was with Susan, who was a Canadian woman, they politely said to us that they had to blindfold us for safety reasons. We drove down to a basement which was a very filthy, bloody, smelly place and that is where the language changed. I could

not see because of the blindfold. Susan was taken to another room. The soldier told me to take off my clothes and to put on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt that smelled like it had been worn by countless tortured, bloodied and sweaty prisoners before me. The strong and unique stench of the cell and the shirt are so ingrained in my memory and are so offensive to me that when I now smell strong body odour, I have flashbacks to that nightmarish time. I was facing the wall still blindfolded when they took my shoes and socks off. A soldier walked me through a hall to a very tiny room that had a hole in the floor for a toilet. The room was only about a metre wide by a metre and a half in depth. The soldier pushed me against the wall and, amongst other threatening and humiliating obscenities, said “if you fall asleep I’ll kick you, you cannot sit down, you are here for good”. He slammed the door and locked it.

My arms were cuffed in the front. I remained standing there. I was very nervous. At that point, I heard many voices including Susan’s as she was being interrogated peacefully. She was offered a blanket and a mattress to sleep on. From what I gathered she⁴ was across from my prison cell. They were asking her why she was with this communist man who was part of a big plot to destroy El Salvador. In the meantime, I heard a man screaming horribly, first from the pain of his head being bashed against the cement wall and then from the excruciating agony of having his ear cut off. I also heard other prisoners crying for help close by, who were also obviously being tortured. The door slammed again, a man came in and changed my hand cuffs to the back. Then, as he put a gun to my head, he said: “You guys are good in the mountains, what do you have to say for yourself. Maybe I should just kill you right here and now”. As he cocked the gun three times pointing it to my head, he walked me to another room and sat me on a chair. Another person came in and said “Daniel, I am a lawyer. I am here to help you but you have to co-operate. I will be back. I want you to stay here and do not move”. There was a silence and I could feel the presence of many people. I could hear the breathing of what seemed to be about seven soldiers. It was very quiet in that room and then all of a sudden one of them jumped on me and started to beat me, punching and kicking me; then I was thrown to the ground and almost lost consciousness.

I could not count⁵ the days from the confusion, but I can surely say there were probably only about five to ten minute breaks between the beatings and the long interrogations. It was extremely intense, relentless, agonizing and exhausting. The pain from the handcuffs around my swollen wrists was excruciating. Every time that I moved from the blows, it seemed that the handcuffs tightened. My lips were dried and bleeding. I was so thirsty. I remembered that there was a toilet in the cell so I

managed to drink a little from it, but not much because there was very little water in it. I asked one of the guards if I could have some water; he took me back to the torture chamber and after another beating he offered me water in a cup. I started to drink it but I realized that there was something diluted in it, so I stopped, but the guy said: “you wanted water, now you drink it son of a bitch”, so I did. Then I felt dizzy immediately and my head felt like it was about to explode. I was there for a little over a week with no food, no water, no sleep, no sitting and the constant thought that I was going to die.

One day they told me that my wife and two daughters had been arrested and they were prepared to kill them if I did not cooperate – meaning I had to accept all the accusations. That was the most challenging moment. I immediately felt defensive and vengeful. I also cried out of desperation and frustration, feeling helpless and disempowered. The cruel threat against my family had gone too far. Another day they took me to another place where I was forced to keep standing. A very tall officer came and told me that he had in his hands some pictures showing me attacking military bases, and setting buses on fire at a street demonstration. For some reason my fear was gone, I did not have much left anyways, so I responded that if he had evidence of that, it was his responsibility to take me to court and press charges: “Your duty, sir, ends right there, and it is up to the judge to decide my fate”. No military likes to be challenged by a civilian, much less admit when they are doing something wrong, so he grabbed me by my hair, lifted me up in the air and smashed me against the floor as he said, “in here you are just a piece of shit”. Then he proceeded to push me very forcefully into my cell. I could not stop the fall to protect myself because I was so weak. As a result, I hit my head against the brick wall so hard that I lost consciousness.

I do not recall what happened after that. All I remember is that when I woke up, I was sitting in front of somebody who said nothing for about half an hour. He just moved papers around, as he watched my reaction to it. He then broke the silence and told me to sign somewhere on a sheet of paper because I was being released. I was still blindfolded but I took my chances because I was exhausted from the violence; I was hungry, thirsty and worried about my family. I felt that this was the only option to get out. So I signed them and then he read what I had just signed. I had just allegedly admitted to several serious, albeit fabricated, charges including the use of heavy weapons. Then he said, “you are going to court”. I thought he was kidding, but they did take me to court. I was very scared not knowing what could happen in court. But it was there that I could see my surroundings for the first time after about eight days of torture. At first, it was a horrible shock, because I could not see anything.

I thought I had lost my sight. Then slowly my vision was blurry and finally I could see the secretary of the court who told me very quietly not to worry and to tell her about what happened to me while in captivity. She caringly but cautiously assured me that the ordeal was over, that I was not the first, nor would I be the last prisoner at that place and that they knew what took place in that basement. Not only did I speak, but I also showed her my bruises, as the man who brought me there watched closely from a distance. There was no evidence on the charges, so I was told that I would be released. From court, I was transferred to a minimum security prison. On the way, the soldiers used every moment of the ride to torture me psychologically. Rather than following the direct and shorter route, they took the long way up a mountainous road and frequently threatened to throw me off the cliffs.

I spent three days in the minimum security prison. Initially, I was placed in a maximum security cell with the most dangerous 'criminals'. Among the five men in the cell, one guy who seemed to be in charge, and whom I actually feared at first, spoke instantly to me in such a reassuring way. He told me not to worry because he knew that I was a political prisoner. He assured me that I would be safe in the cell. Not only did he give me a book of poems, but knowing that I was completely destroyed physically, he instructed the other cellmates to spread out newspapers across the wires of the mattress-less bed and told me to rest. That paper, as thin as it was, felt so comfortable. I fell asleep immediately. Later that evening, I woke up to the noise of thirty other men being forced into our cell that was made for about three people. They all seemed to have known each other, including the original five men in the cell. They exchanged greetings with nick names. As this mob settled in, the cell leader continued to protect my space on the bed. I was so thankful for the rest and safety that ironically some of El Salvador's most dangerous 'criminals' were providing me compared to the brutal treatment I received from the state military who are supposed to protect the people and preserve democracy. The next morning, as many of the prisoners were being transferred out of our cell to another prison, the leader took a moment to reassure me that although he would never be released from prison, I would be getting out and I would be okay. I will never forget the kindness that this man showed to me.

That same day, I was transferred to the grossly overcrowded corner for political prisoners where I learned of the clear distinction made between political prisoners and common 'criminals' in the prison. We were well warned not to cross the line between the two populations. Just a few metres from where we were held, in a very open and visible area, there was a platform with holes that served as the toilets. There was absolutely no privacy for anyone who had to go to the bathroom and there

was no barrier to shield us from the smell or germs as we lived and ate immediately in front of this area.

“Daniel, you’re out!” I heard the words so suddenly and unexpectedly. I felt paralyzed. I was escorted to a room where I was fingerprinted, and told to read and sign the release papers. They were actually release papers. I felt empowered to sign what was truly leading to my freedom. I was picked up by my wife, two daughters, the pastor of our church and some friends. Despite the relief of my release, my family went through hell afterward as we bounced from one safe house to another. My daughters could not understand the chaos and confusion of such an unsettled life. It was an anxiety-ridden time. At that point, I did not show much of the trauma, perhaps because the turmoil of the war was so pervasive in our daily lives. Despite not being able to continue with either my job or my university studies, I managed to get a contract as a driver for a construction company.

A year after my release, just when my family started to feel safer and more comfortable with my freedom, I was arrested again. This time it was definitely a wrongful arrest. I was volunteering at a weeknight meeting at our church in preparation for Sunday school. The meeting finished at 10:00 p.m. and the pastor asked me to accompany another volunteer to another church office to get a second truck to transport the many volunteers back home safely at such a late hour. A young boy about the age of fifteen joined us enthusiastically for the ride. Just as we arrived at the other office, a van with tinted windows stopped abruptly in front of us. I ran frantically to the door of the church office and just as I went to knock, an M16 was pressed against my head and I was warned not to knock on the door or I would lose my life. I was grabbed by the hair and shoved forcefully to the floor of the van. The little boy was rounded up with us. He was petrified. As we were driven to our destination, my fear intensified and based on many things that the soldiers said and did, I really did not think I was going to escape alive. I was hit several times in the head with their guns. They threatened to kill us immediately. They were apparently driving us up to the highest mountain in the capital of San Salvador known as Devil’s Door, where many prisoners were known to be thrown down the cliffs to their death. They used this threat against us. I was quite scared. I prayed to God for my kids.

We were taken to the same basement of my first arrest and torture. I recognized the smells and the voices immediately. At that moment, all the memories came back. I knew that I would go through hell again. The procedure was familiar. First, they blindfolded us and removed our clothes. But they took the other guy first. He was a hard combatant, not easy to bend. It turned out that he, my fellow Sunday school teacher, had

been identified as a member of the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Marti Para La Liberación Nacional). He was obviously being watched and it was a fateful coincidence that our paths crossed at church. After they started to torture him, they took me but this time I went to a desk first.

The voice at the desk penetrated my soul. There are some things in life that one never forgets, like the smell of a perfume or a person's voice. "Your name?", he said. It was the same guy who had tortured me the first time and he knew it too. He asked "Have you ever been in this place?" Why would I lie? I had no fear because I had not done anything wrong. I was at the church. He informed me: "You are at the Policia de Hacienda". "Yes, I have been here before", I replied. I knew the direction the interrogation was going to take but this time I feared it somewhat less because I knew that there were probably about twenty people waiting for the church car to bring them home. I knew that everyone at the church would know about our kidnap-style arrest and disappearance, so I felt hope that the church people would mobilize immediately on our behalf. I also felt comfort in knowing that the pastor of Emmanuel United Church, Reverend Bill Smith, whom I had come to know well through my projects in the church, could be a helpful ally.

Despite my hope, I endured excruciating physical pain during the interrogation. Similar to the first time, the beatings were relentless. But this time, the psychological tricks were not effective because I knew that I had done nothing wrong. I confidently explained the circumstances of my involvement in the church Sunday school and the mere coincidence with the other person targeted during the arrest. In the meantime, I would learn later that the church had hired a lawyer, written to the government and had drawn international attention to our plight. The boy, thankfully not tortured, was released on the third day. I was released on the fourth day. I was told that the International Red Cross was waiting for me outside. I did not have to sign any papers because there was absolutely nothing against me. It was noon when the International Red Cross representative arrived. With a gun to my head, a soldier escorted me to the gate. He told me firmly to follow his orders. He instructed that he would take my blindfold off as we arrived at the gate and warned me that if I looked back it would be all over. As he said this he clicked his gun at the side of my head. I understood the message. As the blindfold was removed and I was thrown out of the gate, I was shocked by the blinding light after four days with a blindfold on indoors. Totally blinded by the sunlight, I crawled on the ground towards the encouraging and guiding voice of the Red Cross representative who assured me that I was okay. It took me at least half an hour to see at least partially.

I was taken immediately to a security house. The church had already

started to make arrangements for my family to leave the country. It had also already criticized the Canadian government for taking too long to process my refugee claim and for thus not having given me the chance to leave El Salvador after my first kidnapping. It took us a week to give away our belongings. In a secured place among many other sponsored torture survivors and refugees, we were informed that we would be leaving the next day. Despite our excitement, we were subjected to one final torture before our escape to Canada. We had been warned by our caregivers that we must keep in a tight unbreakable line at the airport. Refugees had been known to be re-kidnapped at the airport. So not only did all the refugees keep together in a larger group but within our individual families we held each other tight. We kept our children tight between us and held our hands hard. The warning was warranted. At the airport, we were cautioned about the presence of certain people. I myself noticed a man from the political prisoners section who had been suspected as a spy in the minimum security prison where I was held. Upon seeing him, I trembled and wept as I held my wife and children more closely. Those final moments were so stressful. I felt betrayed because freedom seemed so near, yet it could have been taken away so swiftly again right at the last minute. My fear was so intense. But thankfully, the plane took off and we landed in Canada.

Upon our arrival in Canada, our first challenge was the culture shock which included a new language, a new and “suspiciously” quiet society and city, new weather and no family or friends. Nevertheless, we were well supported through the church⁶ community and our plight had gained both television and newspaper attention. We were relieved and grateful. Yet, despite the assistance and the sense of safety for my family, my ordeal had left countless unhealed scars. I battled frequent nightmares, depression, anger, sadness, frustration, despair, loneliness, isolation and erratic behaviour. My ability to trust was broken deeply. I also could not stand people asking me more than one question at a time. I was paranoid about being recaptured and people in military uniform were a great challenge to my sense of safety. I was imprisoned everywhere.

My capacity to cope was totally stripped away. I remember the first day of my cleaning job when my boss gave me tools and supplies, and told me to go downstairs and clean the rooms. I was by myself and as I walked through the hall in the basement, I heard the echo of my own steps; that place and the sounds brought back fresh memories. I immediately threw away my tools and I ran as if I was being chased by vicious dogs. I never returned. Another reaction that shows how profoundly I was affected involved me going often to a traffic light during rush hour and pressing the cross walk button for hours on end. I never crossed the street.

I just pressed the button because I felt like I had the power to control the light. Because my power was completely taken away during the torture, changing the traffic light was one small, albeit seemingly bizarre way for me to regain control.

My wife and children suffered tremendously as a result of the chaos related to my torture and the post-traumatic stress symptoms. It was as if one day they were flourishing and then all of a sudden someone cut their legs off and they fell incapacitated to the ground. They too were imprisoned by my scars and symptoms. Communication with my family started to break down. I spent most of my days in the basement by myself, to a point where I did not talk at all for days. Suicidal thoughts were more frequent and life had no meaning to me. I also mistreated⁷ my daughters and that is what hurts me the most. I feel like I have ruined their lives forever and I am deeply sorry for that. I wish I had known what was going on to avoid the depth of the damage.

My wife and I went for counselling but it did not work for me. While I respect counsellors, they seem to be just making a living out of people's pain to a point where survivors end up victims of another problem: psychological dependence on professionals. It is like the Alcoholics Anonymous organization where people can no longer have the power unless they visit and revisit the "professionals". In some instances I felt that the professionals were recreating the dynamics of interrogation or refusing to be considerate of such a painful experience. My counselling experiences were mostly negative. I also spent two weeks in North Bay in a centre for survivors of abuse; it helped to a certain degree, but again I had to continue going to meetings in my own city. My empowerment never seemed complete. I had to be my own self-helper but that took me a long time.

Eventually my marriage ended in divorce, which, ironically, was the beginning of my turning point. At first it was just another torture for me. I remember wanting to jump off of the 18th floor of my building, but it did not happen; the love of my daughters was stronger and deep inside I also loved my wife. I carried a lot of burdens on my shoulders. I was bent right over from the pressure and I was barely propped up by a small cane; that cane was my creative art and it kept me alive. My outlet was drawing, poetry, painting and music. As life went on, I started to talk to some people and read books; I began to do fitness. I felt that freedom was on my way.

Justice in my country is currently unachievable and I would not waste neither time nor a single penny on its pursuit. Picture this: the assassination of four American Nuns, the assassination of the most prominent Jesuits, the assassination of Bishop Romero, the assassination of thousands upon thousands of men and women, and nobody has been seriously brought

to justice. In comparison, who am I? Not that I do not value my rights and dignity, but if the perpetrators are still in power, how can I even contemplate justice? Furthermore, I am aware that my torturers were following orders and were themselves subjected to cruel and threatening methods that fuelled their emotions and violence which made them comply with their authorities. They were also victims of this tornado. I am not excusing their actions, but I am recognizing their circumstances.

While I did not seek formal justice through the courts because I knew it was out of reach, I did need to restore peace in my life. I figured out what my troubles were and who my enemy was: my own self. I also learned how to let go. First, I had to forgive myself for hurting me, my loved ones, and others who cared for me; forgiveness, although it was not easy, was my salvation. I returned to El Salvador in 2002 and I participated in my own exercise of 'letting go'. I parked my car in front of the prison where I was detained which is still a police institution. There, I released all of my burdens. Within the safety of the car and in the company of a travel companion, I tearfully yelled at the government, the torturers and the soldiers. I raged about how they had destroyed my life, ruined my family, separated me from my kids and country, and robbed me of my studies and degree at the National University of El Salvador. Then, I verbalized my forgiveness, that I was closing that chapter of my life right then and there, and that I was not going to let them bother me anymore. I forgave and let go.

I also wrote a letter to the government of El Salvador, explaining my situation, describing the abuse I was put through in prison, and holding them responsible for the events, including the consequences of that experience. But I also wrote that I wanted to forgive them. I did not ask for justice or compensation. I did not even expect any answer. I just wanted to close that horrible chapter in my life and move on. I admit though that for the sake of closure, mine and all survivors of torture and all the traumas from that war in El Salvador, it would be helpful if the government of El Salvador, as well as the actual perpetrators sincerely apologized and repented. For me, it is not about compensation or the jailing of the torturers as that would be revengeful. But I seek an admission that recognizes their wrongdoing and the devastating losses for the families. Those kinds of admissions and responsibilities would be fantastic and they would be the beginning of a huge change. Such actions would demonstrate that they are willing to genuinely reconnect with Salvadoran society. Justice for me would include changes in the law to ensure that torture survivors and their families are guaranteed effective counselling that fosters genuine empowerment and real independence. I want them to be responsible for the consequences. In my case, I want them to recognize that I lost my studies and my career as an art teacher.

Who will ensure that my daughters receive good counselling so that they can return to their emotional stability?

Through this process, I realized how important it is to be sincere without being disrespectful with your enemies or the ones you have differences with. I also learned how important forgiveness is as a way to move on. Forgiveness does not mean that I forgot about or approved of the torture that I endured. But it allowed me to move on. Forgiveness was key to my reunion with my family. It was not easy and it did not happen overnight. I begged for forgiveness from my wife and daughters, and I took responsibility for my actions and reassured them that it was not their fault. I wanted to rebuild our family. But it was a challenge because so much had changed. We needed to dust off emotions, re-evaluate our situation, and find ways to bring comfort, trust and healing back into the family. It took me months to remove the burdens from my shoulders and feel really confident. My wife and I remarried. Our new journey has been wonderful and I thank my wife and daughters for this new start as a more harmonious family. Peace within is more perceivable now.

When I reconciled with my family, I felt that justice was done. But then I was asked by the Canadian Centre for International Justice (CCIJ)⁸ to share my testimony in a video documentary in order to help bring about justice. It was not until that point that I realized I had in a way been a bit selfish. I had resolved my own world but the world around me was still in pain and still subjected to atrocities. So in an effort to be an ambassador for justice and peace, I agreed to participate in the video project. I want to help fellow torture survivors, and more importantly, I want to put a stop to the endemic torture in all countries. I want to do so not only verbally but also through my paintings. I try to use art as a medium to create awareness of the deep sadness that imprisons people and families after torture. I also want to promote what I call a real democracy in which no one gets hurt for thinking differently or for even thinking the opposite of what I think. War, power and corruption are not the way. Rather, we need to create a dialogue, to open lines of communication between people in a peaceful way - that is where our people power lies. In a genuinely peaceful society, justice would mean equality, fairness and inclusiveness, not bribery, tricks or corruption.

Although my imprisonment and torture took away many things in my life, the perpetrators could not take away my creativity, my artistic skills, and most of all, my love for my people. I have returned to El Salvador many times to help with whatever I can. I have tried to be an ambassador to promote peace, justice, harmony, happiness and hope, especially for those who are in more difficult situations. I have been able to share my creativity through special Christmas events for children and through the opening of a youth centre. I have been able to facilitate poetry, drawing

and running contests, and to teach painting, drama, English and music to impoverished children and youth. I have more plans for community centres to help families with breakfast programs, recreation, art, skills training and cooperatives. While my imprisonment and torture halted my career, and thus affected my income and ability to help financially, I still dream of continuing the social justice and development work that I was so passionate about before my ordeal. In the larger scheme of things, I hope that my humble efforts help to overcome government corruption and wars that create more poverty, more destruction and more hatred, all of which create the dynamics for more prisons and more torture. On a more personal level, I want to give back to people what belongs to people, and at the very least, I want my daughters to be able to say proudly, “that was my Dad”.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The year was 1988 or 1989. I am being intentionally vague to reinforce the effects of my memory loss. It is also part of my self-defence and coping efforts not to remember the details of my ordeal.
- ² The election day was heavily militarized due to the civil conflict that El Salvador was experiencing in the 1980's under a very authoritarian and oppressive military-oriented state.
- ³ In the 1980's, the resistance movement against El Salvador's right-wing military rule was inspired by the political victory of the Sandanistas (leftist revolutionaries) in neighbouring Nicaragua.
- ⁴ Susan was released on the third day of her captivity and she returned to Canada. We met a few times when I first arrived in Canada and then we lost track of each other.
- ⁵ My family recalls that I was abducted for over a week, between eight and ten days.
- ⁶ I take this opportunity to thank Iglesia Bautista Emmanuel in El Salvador and Emmanuel United Church in Canada for all their hard work for my safe release as well as their role in making arrangements for us to settle in Canada and the opportunity of a new start.
- ⁷ Since I was so agitated because of my own struggles, I was short-tempered with my daughters. There was no quality family time and communication was hostile.
- ⁸ The work of the CCIJ is explained in the Prisoners' Struggles section of this issue.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel was born and raised in El Salvador. He was an undergraduate student in Fine Arts at the National University at the height of the civil war when he came to Canada with his family as refugees. An artist and musician, Daniel obtained his Performing Arts Diploma from a Canadian college and is a lay minister in a Christian church in Canada. Internationally, Daniel is an ongoing supporter of youth art programs as well as an advocate for peace and social justice.

RESPONSE

The Struggle against Torture: Universal, Timeless but not Inevitable

Alex Neve

The powerful, heart-wrenching voices from Iran, El Salvador, Honduras and Sri Lanka included in this issue tell an agonizing and sadly universal tale. It is a story about the brutal and soul-destroying experience of torture. It is also a story about the remarkable capacity of the human body and the human spirit to survive and even triumph over that brutality. It is a story that takes us back to the nightmares of imprisonment and unspeakable violence these women and men experienced over twenty years ago. But it is a story also very much anchored in today's global realities, particularly the debilitating setback in the struggle against torture that the world has experienced in the years since September 11, 2001.

That human beings have tortured fellow human beings goes back, of course not just years or decades, but centuries and millennia. Torture, in countless forms and guises, has been used by tyrannical emperors and fascist dictators, by the police and security forces of democratic governments, and by various liberation movements, guerrilla groups, and terrorist organizations as a means of spreading fear, forcing compliance, obtaining confessions, degrading real and perceived opponents, or simply as a means of punishment.

In their wake, torturers have left millions upon millions of victims, not only those who have endured the beatings, mutilation, rape and other abuse, but also their families, particularly children and spouses. The horrifying reach of torture is so poignantly clear, for instance, in the accounts offered by Osiris López regarding her long struggle to come to terms with the torture and eventual killing of her father in Honduras, as well as Saeideh's description of enduring torture sessions with her young baby alongside her while the torturers inflicted their vicious deeds. And there are of course countless men, women and young people who have been forever silenced because they have not survived the horrors of the torture chamber, having died in prison or soon after their release.

It is a long and harrowing history of violence and suffering. There has, however, been remarkable and steady progress in the effort to eradicate torture over the past sixty years. Importantly, in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights included a provision clearly banning torture, no exceptions. Numerous international treaties, as well as national constitutions and laws have followed – all unequivocally declaring

that the torture of anyone, anywhere, for any reason is unconditionally prohibited. There never is an excuse.

That is all good. But these anguished stories of torture in four countries, from the mid-1970's to the late 1980's, remind us with courageous honesty, that all of those fine words have far too often been nothing but cruelly unfulfilled and cavalierly disregarded promises. When it comes to torture, the law has been clear. But the law has been powerless. In Iran, El Salvador, Honduras and Sri Lanka – in fact in a legion of countries on every continent – torturers have continued to claim more and more victims, protected by a shield of impunity that ensures they will face no consequences and will not be held accountable for the grievous crimes they carry out.

What is particularly chilling from these accounts from countries half-way around the world from each other and spanning over fifteen years is the haunting universality of the story of torture. First is the universality of the torturer. Torturers justify their horrific acts, at least to themselves, by dehumanizing their victims: the “son of a bitch” in El Salvador or the “infidel” and “non-believer” in Iran. Torturers hide themselves by blindfolding their victims; they torment their sightless victims by ensuring that they hear the agonized cries of pain of other prisoners being tortured around them. Torturers do not only attack the body, they attack the mind, heart and soul – it was so telling to hear time after time in these stories the ways in which torturers in all four countries threatened the safety and well-being of loved ones as a means of breaking the will and spirit of their victims.

What is also striking in these stories – at times very sorrowful, other times deeply inspiring – are the common threads that mark the experience of surviving torture. We read remarkable accounts of resistance and determination, but also of feeling plagued by a sense of guilt that may last for many long years or decades. There is affirmation of the importance of solidarity and how the smallest acts of kindness can become a very lifeline to survival. Particularly telling in all of these stories is the constant theme that “imprisonment” did not end with release from prison and freedom from their torturers. All recount ongoing imprisonment outside prison walls – be it at the hands of abusive spouses, a repressive society, further arrest, ongoing threats and continuing nightmares.

All eventually found it necessary, therefore, to escape. For these women and men that escape was to Canada. But it was not easy. Canada did not always initially respond with a warm welcome. Osiris López's father, in fact, was turned down by Canada, ended up back in Honduras and paid with his life. Mino Homily escapes from Iran to Turkey, where

her claim for protection was initially rejected, though later accepted, by the UNHCR. And while all express deep appreciation for the safety of refuge in Canada, all make it clear that the years of living here, healing from the deep scars of torture, have also been marked by torment and hardship. That has included the challenge of adjusting to a new land and a new culture, painful marital and parental difficulties, and struggles to cope with the long-term physical and mental impacts left behind by torture. In Orisis López's case, Canada, her country of refuge, was even also – for a while – the place of refuge for one of the men responsible for her father's torture and death. The observation that escape is always fraught with challenges certainly comes through as a stark common thread that binds all of these women and men.

In the end, what is uplifting and humbling to read are what the reflections all offer on fundamental values such as justice, forgiveness and service to others. And for all, those concepts all become central in the journey of survival and even triumph. All talk about the importance of justice, for instance, but not in a punitive or retributive spirit. Clearly for these survivors, justice is important because, more than anything, they believe that it will help to account for the past, ensure the truth is told and hopefully reduce the likelihood of others suffering their same fate. And all the authors in this issue have become deeply committed to finding ways to aid and assist others in the broader effort to safeguard and protect universal human rights – as women's rights advocates, as a counsellor for torture survivors, as a community activist, as a social worker, as a human rights campaigner, and as a lay minister. Their journey towards overcoming the deep injustice of torture lies in helping secure justice and well-being for others.

These stories are universal. Perhaps the even greater disappointment is that they are also timeless. The bitter reality of their timelessness is brought home when viewed against the backdrop of the decade that has just come to an end. We began this past decade of the 21st century faced with a world in which the laws and promises about ending torture were strong and were clear. The challenge was to force governments to finally comply with those laws and deliver the promise of a torture-free world. We see that challenge in these cautionary tales from Iran, El Salvador, Honduras and Sri Lanka.

But then in the aftermath of the horrifying attacks on September 11th 2001, the challenge became much wider and in many respects, more sinister because in the years since, the struggle has reached beyond forcing governments to live up to the promise of ending torture. The struggle has been to shore up and defend the very promise itself. For more

than eight years now, we have faced a debilitating debate about whether torture should, in fact, be unequivocally and universally banned. Instead of redoubling our efforts to confront and do away with torture, we have had to respond to assertions that some torture might be necessary to serve a greater good – such as fighting terrorism – and absurd semantics about whether particular types of abuse, such as waterboarding, even constitute torture in the first place.

We have also watched governments try to circumvent their own responsibility for torture by allowing or even encouraging officials in other countries to carry out their dirty work and then denying any knowledge or involvement. In some instances, they try to pave the way by obtaining assurances from those other governments, regimes very well known for their frequent resort to torture, that this time prisoners will not be tortured. One can only imagine what the women and men whose stories are told in this volume would feel about relying on promises provided by torturers. They would see it for what it is – an end-run around the law and an almost certain back door ticket into a torturer's waiting arms.

The issue of complicity in torture has very much marked the debate here in Canada. A growing number of Canadian citizens – Maher Arar, Abdullah Almalki, Ahmad Elmaati, Muayyed Nureddin, Abousfian Abdelrazik and Omar Khadr – have been abandoned to torturers in Syria, Egypt, Sudan and Guantánamo Bay. Numerous foreign nationals have been subject to unfair legal proceedings through the immigration security certificate system, with the eventual prospect of deportation to a serious risk of torture in such countries as Algeria, Syria and Egypt. Prisoners, apprehended by Canadian soldiers in the course of military operations in Afghanistan, continue to be turned over to Afghan authorities despite the notorious prevalence of torture in Afghan prisons and the frequent warnings from Canadian officials to their superiors as to how real that risk was. It is illegal and a moral shame to torture. It is also illegal and a moral shame to turn a blind eye to torture or, worse, to aid and abet the torturer in the commission of their crimes.

Perhaps most worrying of all is that these recent challenges to the very principle that all torture is to be condemned at all times have come at the hands of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and many other governments that have traditionally been the most forceful and reliable voices taking a stand against torture. Champions now silenced by their own complicity. When it comes to fighting torture, the world needs more champions, not fewer.

These eight stories of torture all unfolded before September 11th 2001. They could not more forcefully remind us today, though, why it is so

crucial to stand vigilant and unwavering in defending the absolute ban on torture. That means rejecting assertions that a little torture might be necessary to shore up a government, enhance security, fight crime, put down an uprising, or any other excuse. Be it Iran, El Salvador, Honduras or Sri Lanka in the 1980's or Syria, Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay today – giving the nod to torture is not only unjust, it is ultimately insecure. It creates more victims, more suffering and more resentment. We remain trapped in the cycles of violence, repression and revenge that lie at the heart of human rights violations, war and terrorism. We must break those cycles, not deepen them.

And there are concrete steps to be taken. One is to break the secrecy that shrouds torture and makes it so easy for the torturer to go about his work. In 2002, the United Nations adopted a new Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Optional Protocol establishes a new international and national level system for inspecting detention centres, all with an eye to identifying and eliminating the conditions that breed and encourage torture. But seven years later, a paltry fifty countries have officially signed the Optional Protocol, binding themselves to the new inspection regime. Canada is not among them. Getting on board must become a priority.

There is also still far to go in ensuring that torturers face justice and are held accountable. International and national laws and courts generally have fairly sweeping jurisdiction to bring accused torturers to trial, no matter where the torture may have occurred. But more resources and more political will are needed to ensure that charges are laid and proceedings go ahead. It is still far too easy and commonplace to commit torture and get away with it in our world. That has to change.

This past year has been one of hopefulness that with the election of President Obama the debate about torture and security has finally been turned around in the United States. But ambiguity and uncertainty lingers. The authors in this issue – Adrian, Saeideh, Osiris, Ezat, Minoo, Anahita, Krishna and Daniel – have very powerfully reminded us that there is a devastating human cost to torture. They also powerfully demonstrate what can and must be done to stand up to torture and work for justice. We all owe it to them to join them in that effort.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Neve is a lawyer, with a Masters Degree in International Human Rights Law from the University of Essex. He has served as Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada since 2000. In that role he has carried out numerous human rights research missions throughout Africa and Latin America as well as within Canada. He speaks to audiences across the country, appears regularly before parliamentary committees and is a frequent commentator in the media. Alex has served as a member of the Immigration and Refugee Board, taught at Osgoode Hall Law School, been affiliated with York University's Centre for Refugee Studies, and worked as a refugee lawyer in private practice and in a community legal aid clinic. Alex has been named an Officer of the Order of Canada and has received an honorary Doctorate of Laws degree from the University of New Brunswick.

PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT): “Hope after the Horror”

Jessica Doyle and Riana Marcotte

Torture is an adverse reality affecting countless individuals around the world. The violence experienced by its survivors has long-lasting and far-reaching consequences. Forced to leave their homes, loved ones and other victims because of intolerable conditions, people displaced to Canada often have the additional burden of trying to cope with a traumatising past in an unfamiliar territory. Alleviating the suffering of such individuals and their families requires a specific and comprehensive approach, one that the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT) aims to achieve so as to provide the best possible care for torture survivors arriving to Canada.

In 1983, the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture was established as a non-profit registered charity by a group of Toronto-based doctors, lawyers, social workers and members of community groups. The CCVT is operated by a volunteer-based advisory board, as well as eighteen full-time and part-time staff members. When the CCVT was formed, many of the victims were in the process of claiming refugee status in Canada, and professionals recognized a need for specialized counselling for health, social as well as legal problems faced by this particular group. After the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims in Copenhagen, the CCVT became the second most recognized establishment of this type.

Organizations such as the CCVT are necessary due to the prevalence of torture throughout the world despite the existence of United Nations (UN) declarations against the use of torture. Torture survivors often seek refuge from their countries of origin out of necessity, because of the human rights abuses perpetrated within their states – frequently by government officials. Many of the victims who are able to claim refugee status in Canada come from current war-torn countries, such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Others are coming from areas where ethnic conflict has created unstable and violent situations, such as in Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Iran. The Centre has assisted approximately 14,000 survivors from 136 different countries. It is extremely difficult for torture victims to seek and claim refugee status, especially when they lack the documentation. It is imperative that groups such as the CCVT exist to help torture survivors cope once they have gone through the ordeal of escaping their countries of origin.

Torture survivors are imprisoned by the memory of what they have experienced and by the long-lasting physical, psychological and emotional scars. They must rebuild their lives while re-living the moments of torture that contribute to the stress, anxiety and alienation they experience in their new environments. Survivors and families who are forced to leave their native countries are assisted by CCVT-affiliated lawyers, doctors, support workers, as well as other professionals who offer individualized assistance for them to begin the healing process.

The services provided by the CCVT include counselling, language training, legal assistance, crisis intervention, art therapy and aid with settlement into Canada. After learning about each individual survivor's needs, counselling aims to provide torture survivors with the resources necessary for empowerment and integration within their new community settings. The CCVT may also act on behalf of survivors when dealing with potentially overwhelming government departments, such as Citizenship and Immigration Canada. In addition, the Centre facilitates networking with other torture survivors and volunteers in order to alleviate common feelings of isolation. These support groups are available for men, women, children and youth who can benefit from networking with other torture survivors who are able to support each other more effectively because of their common experiences, backgrounds and obstacles. Since many of the individuals and families helped by the CCVT come from different countries, the support they offer to assist torture survivors with settlement and education are integral to the individuals' healing process.

Alongside a dedication to helping survivors of torture, it is also the Centre's mission to promote the respect of human rights and to educate the public about the harsh conditions facing newly arriving torture survivors. Various awards have been created to recognize the valuable contributions that individuals make to build an equitable and just society through sustained and innovative contributions in the community, leadership, initiative, perseverance and originality.

Because denial enables torture practices to continue, the CCVT also advocates for the rights of torture victims. For instance, in a media release from December 10th 2009, the CCVT called on the Canadian government to intervene regarding the torture of detainees in Afghanistan, in which the Canadian forces were implicated. The CCVT requested that a public inquiry be made into the allegations in order to determine Canada's role, and to ensure human rights are not devalued by Canadian enforcement and interrogation officers in the future.

Restoring human dignity is also an essential component of the CCVT's mandate. The CCVT has a tremendous responsibility to help survivors once they reach Canada. Language barriers, health needs and

the adaptation to Canadian life are added difficulties for people recovering from horrific and life-changing experiences resulting from torture. It takes time and support for survivors to reach the point where they can live without stress, fear and insecurity. The existence of the CCVT is needed for survivors to regain the human dignity that their torturers attempted to take away.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture
194 Jarvis Street
Toronto, Ontario
M5B 2B7
(416) 363-1066
www.ccvvt.org

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jessica Doyle is a Master's student in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. Her areas of interest include environmental crime, human rights and the critique of neo-liberal state practices throughout the world.

Riana Marcotte is a Master's student in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. After developing an interest in prisoner rights through a course on abolitionism, she has focused her research on discovering ways through which prisoners' labour rights can be protected.

Both authors conducted research on the CCVT in a graduate course in Criminology on human rights and crimes against humanity at the University of Ottawa.

Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC International)

Shannon O'Connor

The Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International (TASSC) was founded in 1996 in Washington (DC) by Sister Dianna Ortiz, an American nun who was a victim of torture in Guatemala during the late 1980's. In her novel *The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth* (2002, Orbis Books), Sister Ortiz recalls being abducted from a secured convent compound and being taken to a secret detention centre where she was gang raped, beaten, burned repeatedly with cigarettes, lowered into a pit with dying and dead bodies, and then physically forced to brutally slay a fellow female captive. After a horrific twenty-four hours of interrogation, Sister Ortiz was released when the English-speaking commander of her torturers, whom she later learned was American, ordered the end of her ordeal when he recognized her from media reports. In the months and years that followed, Sister Ortiz embarked on the long and arduous road to healing, vowing along the way to never forget those who had suffered beside her and to speak for those who could no longer speak for themselves.

The Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International is the only organization founded by and for survivors of torture. Made up of survivors from all over the world, TASSC's mission is to end the practice of torture wherever it occurs and to empower survivors, their families and communities wherever they are. Through a variety of efforts including protest marches, rallies, testimony sharing, and media campaigns, TASSC seeks to increase global awareness of torture and to influence domestic as well as international policy regarding its abolishment. Recognizing that torture survivors often face a number of unique challenges that make traditional forms of treatment difficult, TASSC offers a variety of different programs designed to help these individuals as they attempt to rebuild their lives and put their horrific experiences behind them.

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITIES OF HEALING

Despite the alarming worldwide prevalence of torture, only a handful of treatment centres exist for survivors. Due to the difficulties that survivors often have trusting those in authoritative positions, traditional forms of therapeutic treatment are regularly ineffective. Through their International Communities of Healing, TASSC seeks to provide survivors with a safe and supportive atmosphere in which they can come together and help

each other heal. International Communities of Healing currently exist across the United States and in countries all over the world, including Canada, Mexico, Bosnia, the Philippines and the Democratic Republic of Congo. From meeting weekly for coffee to forming recreational sports teams and participating in art or self-defence classes, these communities are founded on the notion that survivors are often in the best position to support and empower one another throughout the healing process.

HELPING HANDS

While it is impossible to calculate the number of torture survivors, recent estimates suggest that there are approximately 500,000 survivors currently residing in the United States alone. Many of these individuals have fled their native countries as a result of persecution and abuse, and therefore often lack financial resources and access to social services. Through its *Helping Hands* program, TASSC seeks to aid survivors as they make the difficult transition back into society and attempt to rebuild their lives. *Helping Hands* provides survivors with medical, psychological and legal assistance, as well as help with tasks such as learning a new language or finding a job. As survivors adjust to their new lives and find stable employment, they are given the opportunity to contribute to the *Helping Hands* emergency fund, through which they can give back to the program and help fellow survivors who are beginning the process.

TRUTH SPEAKERS

Due to their unique knowledge and experiences, the members of TASSC believe that survivors are often the ultimate experts on the subject of torture. Despite this belief, however, survivors' voices are often noticeably absent from academic and political discussions regarding torture. In response to this exclusion, TASSC has formed *Truth Speakers*, a community of survivors willing to speak out about their experiences of torture. *Truth Speakers* gives presentations to a number of different organizations, including church groups, non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups as well as high school and university classes. By encouraging survivors to speak out about their experiences and help educate the public about the realities of torture, TASSC is attempting to send the message that these individuals have authentic and valuable contributions to make to international discourses concerning torture.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

TASSC International further disseminates information about the significance of abolition efforts and support services through its documentary *Breaking the Silence: Torture Survivors Speak Out*. The video features mainly a support group setting whereby survivors from countries like the Philippines, Kenya, Lebanon, Syria, Colombia, Honduras, El Salvador, Argentina and Paraguay recount various experiences of torture, persecution, humiliation, threats and deprivation, including being urinated on, beaten, whipped, asphyxiated and shocked.

Some of the more harrowing experiences revealed in the documentary include the testimonies of two women. One shares her story of being forced to hold the cranium of her beheaded husband in her hands. Another woman explains in agonizing detail how, when she was eight months pregnant, she endured a two week ordeal during which time she was brutally raped, beaten, hooded, burned, given electric shocks, had her finger nails removed, and was taunted with food and water yet always deprived of it. She states that while being tortured “*I could no longer feel my body. I only thought about my womb. I felt my baby moving up and down. I felt as if we cried together*”.

Beyond the shocking details of unfathomable torture, *Breaking the Silence* also reinforces the significance of TASSC’s contributions in the lives of individual survivors and their families by demonstrating the extraordinary healing potential of its services, particularly those that enable survivors with shared experiences to gather and support each other by speaking out against human rights violations.

This process of empowerment is further illustrated by the TASSC logo, which is intended to reflect how underneath the protective and supportive umbrella of a community of survivors, a person can rise courageously and safely from the position of bowing under oppression. In addition to the programs listed above, TASSC also helps to coordinate the United Nations International Day in Support of Torture Victims and Survivors each year on June 26th. Their members tirelessly lobby government, insisting that perpetrators and supporters of torture be brought to justice, regardless of the high-ranking governmental positions that they may occupy. Through this powerful combination of activism and support, TASSC reminds its members that what has happened to them is not their fault, and encourages them to speak out towards positive change. These courageous survivors are conveying a powerful message regarding the exemplary strength and resilience of the human spirit in the face of tremendous adversity.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International
(TASSC International)
4121 Harewood Road NE, Suite B
Washington, DC 20017
Telephone: (202) 529-2991
Fax: (202) 529-8334
Website: www.tassc.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shannon O'Connor is currently completing her Master's in Criminology at the University of Ottawa. Since receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Queen's University, Shannon has been concerned with the relationship between mental illness and the criminal justice system. Her concern for torture survivors began with a paper that she wrote for a graduate level criminology course on human rights and crimes against humanity. She is particularly interested in exploring the psychological effects of torture, as well as the various forms of treatment available to support survivors and their families.

Serving the Survivors of Human Rights Abuses: Canadian Centre for International Justice (CCIJ) *Caitlin Hawkes-Frost and Rochelle Stevenson*

The Canadian Centre for International Justice (CCIJ) is a national, non-profit, non-governmental organization based in Ottawa, Ontario that provides legal information and support services to survivors and relatives of victims of severe human rights abuses. Composed of experts in human rights, law, immigration and health services, the CCIJ's mission is to seek justice and healing for those who have experienced genocide, torture or other human rights violations. In a world marked by ongoing atrocities and brutal human rights violations, the CCIJ provides a range of much-needed services to individuals with cases connected to Canada.

Primarily a social justice organization, the CCIJ offers a variety of resources and referral services, both for survivors and for individuals with close relations to victims of human rights abuses. The CCIJ is limited to addressing what are generally considered the most severe violations: acts of torture, murder and forced disappearances by governments or state officials, as well as broader abuses, including crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide. This narrow list of violations includes those that are subject to universal jurisdiction, meaning that these abuses can be investigated and prosecuted anywhere in the world, regardless of where the violations occurred or the nationality of the victim and perpetrator.

The CCIJ will conduct investigations into human rights abuses on behalf of victims, and then provide the necessary information and referrals for those individuals to pursue their own chosen course of justice and to hold their abusers accountable for violations and atrocities. Investigations may result in prosecutions, extradition proceedings or civil lawsuits where survivors may seek financial compensation from the perpetrator. While the CCIJ does not provide legal representation, it does remain involved, providing assistance to the survivors in the process of justice-seeking. This includes helping the survivors retain legal counsel and obtain access to victim support funds.

In order for the CCIJ to become involved, the case must have some connection to Canada, often through the presence of a survivor or relative or the perpetrator. These criteria narrow the investigative capacity of the CCIJ, but do not impact its ability to seek compensation for survivors or for the CCIJ to engage in publicity campaigns to raise the profile of the abuses of human rights in Canadian society. When it comes to supporting the survivors of human rights abuses, the CCIJ itself does not provide professional emotional support services for torture survivors, but

is connected to and makes referrals to a range of organizations, such as the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture. Instead, the CCIJ supports survivors by investigating abuses and through legal reform efforts to help facilitate formal avenues of justice for human rights abuses such as genocide and torture. One example of this work is the CCIJ's efforts to reform the *State Immunity Act* in Canada, a piece of legislation that essentially provides foreign governments with immunity from being sued in Canadian courts. While *individuals* can be prosecuted anywhere under the principle of universal jurisdiction, governments frequently have immunity from civil lawsuits. The CCIJ is pressuring for changes to the *State Immunity Act*, not only in light of ongoing abuses, but also because of the limited resources of the Canadian government to pursue prosecutions.

Although the CCIJ provides essential support to survivors of human rights violations, due to limited resources and the constraints of universal jurisdiction, the organization can only pursue a relatively small range of abuses. Nevertheless, if contacted by a survivor of other human rights violations, the CCIJ tries to provide referrals to other organizations. Even with the challenges faced by the CCIJ in trying to achieve justice, they offer valuable support to survivors of human rights violations. The support and information, the connection to other support groups, the investigations and resulting evidence provided for prosecutions or civil cases, and the law reform efforts to improve legal mechanisms are all vital to facilitating the form of justice that survivors choose to pursue. The CCIJ provides ready access to much needed legal resources for survivors who have fled their homes and arrived in an unfamiliar environment, following their experiences of violence and brutality. Since the CCIJ is a non-governmental and non-police organization, many survivors are more trusting of the help offered and this trust is an important step in the healing and justice-seeking process.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Canadian Centre for International Justice
312 Laurier Avenue East Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 1H9
Phone: (613) 744-7667 Fax: (613) 746-2411 Email: info@ccij.ca
Website: www.ccij.ca

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Caitlin Hawkes-Frost is a Master's student in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. Caitlin's primary research interests include restorative and transitional justice, women's and sex worker's rights, experiences of imprisonment and critical criminology.

Rochelle Stevenson is a Master's student in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. Her primary research interests are violence against women, animal cruelty, media and crime, research methods and criminological theory. She has extensive volunteer and research experience working with and supporting federal prisoners in British Columbia.

Both authors conducted research on the CCIJ in a graduate course in Criminology on human rights and crimes against humanity at the University of Ottawa.

Apprécié Exil : Un service de réhabilitation pour les victimes de tortures

Le Centre Exil

I

LE CENTRE EXIL : DEPUIS PLUS DE 30 ANS

Exil est un centre de santé mentale situé à Bruxelles (Belgique) et spécialisé dans la réhabilitation de réfugiés ayant été victimes de tortures et/ou de violence organisée dans leur pays d'origine. Le Centre Exil trouve ses racines dans l'expérience du COLAT (Collectif Latino-Américain de Travail Psycho-social) fondé en 1976 par des professionnels de la santé latino-américains qui, ayant été eux-mêmes victimes de violations des Droits de l'Homme dans leurs pays d'origine, ont réussi à s'organiser, avec le soutien de professionnels européens, pour mettre leurs expériences et compétences professionnelles au service de leur communauté d'exilés. Ainsi, ils ont développé un programme de santé communautaire destiné à prévenir et traiter les effets de la violence organisée et des multiples violations des Droits de l'Homme chez l'individu, la famille et la communauté produits par les dictatures latino-américaines.

L'équipe est constituée de professionnels de disciplines et cultures différentes et offre ainsi aux personnes qui consultent un cadre médico-psycho-social interdisciplinaire et interculturel. L'approche de la souffrance est globale et les soins sont donnés par une équipe de professionnels multidisciplinaire composée de médecins généralistes, de psychiatres, de psychologues, de travailleurs sociaux et d'un personnel d'accueil. L'approche thérapeutique est invariante dans son éthique mais elle a été confrontée de façon permanente aux politiques locales et internationales de réglementation des flux migratoires et de la politique d'asile.

Depuis sa création, le COLAT a bénéficié de l'appui et du soutien académique du Département de psychiatrie de la Katholieke Universiteit van Leuven, dirigé par le professeur Franz Baro. De plus, le projet a été, depuis ses débuts jusqu'à l'année 1984, soutenu financièrement par des institutions non-gouvernementales européennes (Brott fur die Welt, en Allemagne, le Conseil Mondial des Églises, en Suisse, Entraide et Fraternité et Broederlijk Delen, en Belgique) et par des organismes internationaux (Le Haut Commissariat pour les Réfugiés des Nations Unies, et plus tard, le Fonds Volontaire des Nations Unies pour les victimes de la torture).

II

LE PROGRAMME THÉRAPEUTIQUE DE RÉHABILITATION DES VICTIMES DE TORTURES

Depuis près de trente ans, le Centre Exil développe un programme spécifique d'accompagnement global de la santé pour des personnes exilées et victimes de tortures. Bénéficiant d'une expérience avec plusieurs dizaines de milliers de patients, les modèles d'intervention ont été affinés au cours des années. Toutes les victimes de tortures qui consultent le Centre ont la possibilité de bénéficier d'une psychothérapie individuelle et/ou de groupe à long-terme.

Un dialogue avec les psychothérapeutes et les différents membres du groupe sur les enjeux de la situation vécue est destiné à aider la victime à se resituer par rapport aux techniques de manipulation psychologique des tortionnaires. Ce modèle d'intervention a pour finalité d'aider les victimes à se libérer de l'emprise psychologique des tortionnaires en découvrant le processus de culpabilisation auquel elles ont été soumises par les bourreaux et en encadrant à nouveau leur vécu de peur, de doutes quant à leurs valeurs personnelles, de honte et de souffrance, comme étant des réponses naturelles face à la situation extrême. Dans ce contexte, la victime peut prendre conscience de ses ressources personnelles et réaliser comment sa propre créativité lui a permis de survivre. Toutes les démarches thérapeutiques s'adressent à l'individu en relation avec son entourage familial et social.

Le modèle d'intervention et les techniques thérapeutiques ont pour finalité d'agir sur :

- 1) L'aspect traumatique : conséquence de la douleur extrême, les dommages corporels, la perte des camarades, amies et/ou membres de la famille, les violences sexuelles, parmi d'autres blessures subis par les victimes. Dès lors, il s'agit de soigner les blessures somatiques et psychologiques provoquées par la torture.
- 2) Le traumatisme de la personnalité, résultat du processus de manipulation psychologique des tortionnaires. Il s'agit ici de guérir le processus d'aliénation de la personnalité des victimes et les conséquences du processus de lavage de cerveau.
- 3) L'infiltration de l'horreur dans le réseau familial et social

des victimes. À ce niveau, l'intervention se situe autour de la reconstruction de la famille et du tissu social de la victime.

Parmi tous les patients qui consultent le Centre Exil, les enfants sont les plus vulnérables car ils cumulent cette série de facteurs de fragilisation. Mais la perte la plus importante vécue par l'enfant victime de la guerre est celle de sa sécurité de base et de sa confiance dans les adultes, qui au lieu de lui apporter soutien et protection, ont été les acteurs du drame qui a ravagé son existence. De plus, la souffrance et le déracinement vécus par les parents provoquent une situation de vulnérabilité dans l'exercice de la fonction parentale et induit un risque plus important de maltraitance et de négligence. Notre action porte donc sur l'enfant, mais aussi sur ses parents, ainsi que les autres adultes qui l'entourent. Nous suivons également des adolescents non-accompagnés ou vivant en famille, avec des membres de leur communauté ou d'autres personnes les ayant accueillis dans leur foyer. L'objectif principal de nos interventions est de soutenir leur recherche d'identité et d'autonomie dans le pays qui les accueille. Il s'agit également de soutenir ces jeunes qui vivent de profondes difficultés liées à la négligence ou l'absence parentale. La fragilisation des femmes met en risque la structure identitaire individuelle et culturelle de chaque sujet. Notre équipe est préoccupée par l'état de santé de ces femmes et considère que ce projet permet, dans la continuité qui est proposée, d'éviter la chronicisation de leur souffrance et leur exclusion de la société. En ce qui concerne les hommes, il s'agit de leur offrir un traitement médical, psychiatrique, psychologique de nature à leur permettre de retrouver un bien-être et à proposer des activités communautaires de manière à les sortir de la solitude.

Parallèlement aux activités thérapeutiques en Belgique, les professionnels du COLAT ont participé de façon active à la restauration des Droits de l'Homme et de la démocratie dans différents pays latino-américains, ainsi qu'au soutien de l'action des différentes organisations non-gouvernementales locales, qui, spécialement au Chili, en Uruguay, en Argentine et en Amérique Centrale, travaillaient pour la défense des Droits de l'Homme et le soutien médico-psycho-social des victimes sur place. Différents membres de l'équipe thérapeutique du COLAT ont participé à des missions clandestines à l'intérieur de ces pays pour soutenir ces combats. Depuis janvier 1985, le COLAT a commencé à élargir ses services à d'autres communautés de réfugiés provenant de différents pays du monde. En effet, suivant les événements socio-politiques, ce sont d'autres victimes de violations des Droits de l'Homme qui demandent l'asile en Belgique. C'est ainsi qu'en 1986, le Centre COLAT devient le Centre EXIL (Centre médico-psycho-social pour Réfugiés et Victimes

de Tortures) en ouvrant ses différents services à toutes les communautés de réfugiés et en prenant en charge de façon progressive le suivi médico-psycho-social des demandeurs d'asile et d'une partie importante des personnes déboutées par la procédure de reconnaissance du statut de réfugié. Aujourd'hui les personnes victimes de violations des Droits de l'Homme qui bénéficient du Programme d'Exil sont originaires d'Afrique, d'Amérique Latine, d'Asie, du Moyen-Orient et d'Europe de l'Est. Ces personnes, en plus d'avoir connu toutes sortes de violations de leurs droits et d'avoir été victimes de situations de violence extrême, sont confrontées à une dégradation des conditions d'accueil. Ainsi, un des axes du programme d'Exil est de promouvoir des conditions d'accueil favorables dans la société belge. En effet, nos expériences cliniques nous ont appris qu'un accueil solidaire est un des facteurs fondamentaux pour soutenir les ressources naturelles des victimes de violence dans leur combat pour reconstruire leur identité ainsi que leur réseau familial et social, et ainsi dépasser les traumatismes consécutifs à la répression, l'emprisonnement, la torture, le viol, la mort des proches, parmi plusieurs autres chocs et construire un projet d'avenir.

POUR PLUS DE RENSEIGNEMENTS

Le Centre Exil 282 Avenue de la Couronne 1050 Bruxelles, Belgique
Téléphone : +32 2 534 53 30 Fax : +32 2 534 90 16
E-mail : info@exil.be Site web : www.exil.be

BOOK REVIEWS

Confessions of an Innocent Man: Torture and Survival in a Saudi Prison

by William Sampson

Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd. (2005), 432pp.

Reviewed by Pascal Dominique-Legault

Being much more than a mere description of the horrors William Sampson endured during his 963 days of imprisonment and solitary confinement in Saudi Arabia, *Confessions of an Innocent Man* is a complex firsthand account of the feelings, emotions and mental representations of an innocent man subjected to torture, and forced into writing and rewriting confessions that will be later used to incriminate him and his fellow friends. Left without adequate legal representation or diplomatic aid and deprived of a fair trial, Sampson is beaten into falsely confessing of being a British spy involved in two car bombings in Saudi Arabia. This book review focuses on the disorientation regime he was subjected to, the survival strategies he developed, his relations with the Canadian Embassy and the humanity he encountered despite the torture.

Early on, Sampson acquaints us with the sensory deprived environment that contained him and describes his processing into a cell. He notes that by assigning you a number and by effectively eradicating your name, it serves more than to put you off balance – it literally strips you of your assumed place in the world, of your sense of self, of your own identity and deprives you of everyday life cues. Once processed, he was confronted with a disorientation regime based on waiting games meant to produce anxiety, fear and loss of control. He experienced sleep deprivation induced by being handcuffed to a cell door which eventually led him to hallucinate. He was also subjected to physical and psychological abuse – all meant to destabilize him into confessing crimes he did not commit. We also learn that he rapidly became a victim of torture at the Al Ulaysha interrogation centre and the Al Ha'ir detention. The fanaticism of his captors seemed to be directed to the conquest of his very soul like the chilling pious trials by fire or water. Never did it appear to cross his captors' minds that Sampson might have been innocent. He was consequently subjected to beatings, to repeated sessions of falanga¹ while hanging upside down and to electric shocks. He was raped on two different occasions and was often left in stress positions or the “hog-tied position”. He was physically, sexually, psychologically intimidated and humiliated to get his “mind right” or, as his captors used to say, to put him in the “right way”. A cycle of lecturing,

beatings, relecturing, and beatings would go on *ad nauseam* to a point where he could not endure the pain any longer and would confess to whatever they wanted to hear to stop the torture. However, his captors' promises to relieve him from the pain, if he were to confess, were short lived for, once a confession was obtained. They then moved on to pin other false charges on him using torture to collect their "beaten in" evidence. In his account, Sampson uses a degree of humour and sarcasm to depict his captors, but also to show their ludicrous and sometimes contradictory attempts to pin fictitious crimes on him related to homosexuality, alcohol, drugs, murder and terrorism.

From the beginning, and despite Sampson's attempts to comply with the demands of his captors to prevent the use of violence against him, he engaged in resistance. This resistance, although not confrontational at the time, targeted the disorientation regime to which he was subjected. His story portrays a battle for psychological and emotional independence from his captors, a struggle between sanity and insanity, a fight to keep control, and to locate himself in time and space through the use of a series of survival strategies. He used the prayer calls, the natural lighting, and his "rice diary",² which eventually ingeniously became a "book diary",³ as a means to grasp control of the day and time.

One of the most important aspects of his resistance was either to clear his mind through meditation in order to sink less in the fear, anxiety and stress or, on the contrary, to keep his mind occupied within this stimuli lacking environment. He occupied his mind by reliving positive memories and experiences. Lost in his mind, bits of meaningful poetry would resurface and he would eventually come to recite a specific excerpt over and over as a powerful mantra to give himself courage and strength. Even if it did not drive the suffering away, it was sufficient to prevent a complete breakdown. As he says, he would leave his prison cell behind as he walked free in his mind. The more Sampson's mind was active and occupied, the more it helped to overcome the physical and psychological turmoil.

He also used his senses to record a great deal of information on his whereabouts and his captors, making a habit of memorizing every small detail in case it might be useful in the long run. The ritual cleansing and careful examination of his body after each torture episode occupied his time, like his "hidden treasures" made of small amounts of toilet paper which he fidgeted, rolled and unrolled into balls and chewed to help distract himself, as well as alleviate the intense stress that he is facing. The toilet paper also conveyed a sense of victory for he had to steal the strips and was often asked to empty his pockets when his scheme was uncovered. As small and as insignificant as these activities might seem, they purposively help him endure, give him a minor sense of control,

create a small area of privacy and basically help him anchor himself in time and place as well as preserve his sanity and sense of self.

Through his detention, his days became centred on seeking small victories, small advantages, to gain a small angle here and there. At one point in the book, Sampson refers to the politics of his incarceration and treatment as a complex chess game that he had been playing from day one. At first his struggles were mainly fought against the disorientation regime, but gradually he came to use whatever limited resources he had as means of resistance. For example, he carefully engaged in the writing and rewriting of confessions. Even if general and specific details were being beaten into the confessions, he managed to try to contradict, invalidate and show the absurdity of these confessions through his written words. William Sampson was beaten and tortured so intensely that he eventually suffered a heart attack. Paradoxically, this constituted a pivotal moment for him as his captors temporarily lost control over him. That is when he started to accept his fate, noticed the damaging effects of getting his hopes up and started to rely only on himself. He realized that death would be a small price to pay to stop the torture and would be in fact a form of freedom from the inhumanity, a conclusion that led him to refuse a much needed operation to remain in poor health to avoid more torture. An equally important realization was the problems his death would cause to everyone, from the embassy to his captors. He came to believe that his captors would be highly embarrassed if he were to die which turned out to be “strangely empowering” for him, made him feel “more alive” and made his sense of self return more strongly than ever. Therefore, Sampson used the fact that he would not be allowed to die as the result of torture to engage in more confrontational resistance and launched a cyclical campaign of action – reaction where interaction was part of the battle. Amongst other things, he used his nakedness and the Koran to insult his captors, he threw food, spit on his captors, stared fiercely at them, contradicted them, bit them, concealed a scorpion on his food tray, shred his clothes into pieces, mainly to resist the injustices he faced, to fight back, and provoke direct confrontations. Even though his “insolence” was punished and his privileges withdrawn, he engaged in a “dirty protest” using his urine and faeces to smear his cell. In response to religious propaganda and indoctrination, Sampson eventually went on a medical strike. As the events progressed and escalated, he decided to go on a hunger strike. Before the end of this potentially fatal strike, he was released after many visits by Canadian dignitaries from the Bloc Québécois and the Liberal Party, diplomatic officials, a lawyer and psychiatrists. His account stops in the early stages of his healing process and the reclamation of his identity.

During his gruesome experience, his only wishes were to have somebody look for him and to be granted visits from the embassy as he believed it would put an end to his torture. These hopes were dashed when the Canadian diplomats conducted their interviews in the presence of two of his brutal interrogators where he frequently saw them siding with his torturers. Beaten and instructed to say what needed to be said to these visitors or during his trial hearings, at first, Sampson was unable to directly tell the officials he was being tortured. Something he later regretted, because complying did not necessarily stop the torture. Later on, his attempts to send coded messages to the Canadian representatives seemed useless as the latter appeared to be involved in a culture of denial in order to protect Canada's relations with Saudi Arabia. Sampson perceived that the Canadian officials accepted without any critical assessment the confessions he and his friends were beaten into. Their role was limited to filling bureaucratic papers and showing the world they were doing what they could while Sampson and his friends continued to be tortured. He felt that the Canadian officials were more concerned with appeasing his captors than with helping him or his family. At a certain point, feeling that there was not much the embassy could do for him, he refused their visits and, in a moment of frustration, asked the embassy to revoke his Canadian citizenship, an all too meaningful gesture under the circumstances.

Sampson's account of these tragic events leaves the reader longing for more information on what has become of Canada's foreign and diplomatic policies. His case and subsequent book efficiently raises serious questions of the complicity of Canadian officials in torture abroad, the use of information derived from torture, and the overall impunity and responsibility of each actor in torture, from the prison doctors or psychiatrists, to the guards, the torturers, and, not the least, the government officials involved. With that said, I felt his story had been cut short. An account on the complexities of his healing process and another on the politics of claiming justice once physically freed would be an interesting follow-up to his already significant contribution. The arduous post-torture processes of healing and quests for justice shed further light on the enduring complexities associated with detention-based abuses.

As a final note, I strongly encourage readers to explore Sampson's analysis on the politics of incarceration, torture and resistance. His story is one of survival and resistance that transcends the sheer inhumanity under which his body and mind were subjugated. Paradoxically, his story of inhumanity is mainly one of humanity, beauty and freedom. Instead of sheering into a black and white analysis of domination, Sampson reveals gestures of humanity by some of his captors: a nurse who acknowledged

his experience, disapproving nods from the medical dispenser at the sight of his bruised body and guards who literally covered the door while Sampson was let free from stress positions imposed by his interrogators. The smallest kind gesture would make him feel less isolated in the sea of inhumanity that surrounded him and would help him cope. May it be known that Sampson acknowledges beautifully that through the lack of humanity of his captors, he was able to find his own humanity and become a better person – a positive outcome often difficult to recognize within the gruesome experience of torture.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Form of corporal punishment and torture in which the soles of the feet are beaten repetitively with an object. Although extremely painful, it is a method that leaves few physical marks. In Sampson's case, he was beaten with a rattan cane (that broke once) and an axe handle confiscated from his home. These beatings were also directed towards his buttocks and his testicles.
- ² His concealed rice diary consists of an accumulation of rice grains taken from his meals. One single unblemished grain marks the passing of a day, a bitten in half grain marks a day without sleep, and a grain stained in some manner (with faeces) would indicate each day of torture (p. 106).
- ³ While being deprived of writing materials, Sampson transforms a simple book into a diary by folding and tearing some pages. It becomes a more efficient, flexible and accurate method to record the events than cumulating rice.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Pascal D.-Legault was the “war on terror” coordinator for Amnesty International (Canada francophone) from January 2008 to December 2009, during which he worked to raise awareness on the many casualties of the on-going conflict. He completed his Master's in Criminology at the University of Ottawa. His thesis examined the political discourses regarding security and human rights during the passing of Canada's Anti-terrorism Act. He is also the co-founder of *Documentary Days: Inquiries on Social Conflicts* at the University of Ottawa where he is a lecturer for the Winter 2010 semester.

Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror

by Kerry Pither, Forward by Maher Arar

Toronto: Viking Canada (2008), 460 pp.

Reviewed by Mike Larsen

To say that Canada's national security community has an accountability problem is an understatement. While the bodies responsible for providing review or oversight for the various components of this system have their own particular deficiencies, the system as a whole lacks anything resembling a meaningful top-town oversight mechanism (Whitaker and Farson, 2009). This is problematic, as Canadian national security activities – particularly post-2001 – have taken on an increasingly integrated and collaborative character, both nationally and transnationally. A good example of this is Project A-O Canada, an immediate post-11 September 2001 anti-terrorism investigation led by the RCMP, but linked to CSIS and, through the sharing of information, to a host of other agencies. Information compiled by Ottawa RCMP officers would eventually, through a complex series of interactions, contribute to the extrajudicial kidnapping and removal-to-torture of four Canadian men. No single body had – or at present, has – the authority or capacity to oversee the range of inter-agency actions that led to these violations (Larsen and Deisman, 2008). When the questions surrounding these 'extraordinary renditions' eventually became too big to ignore – something that required sustained pressure campaigns by committed justice coalitions – the Canadian government did what it traditionally does when confronted with such scandals: it created large-scale, post-hoc, single-issue inquiries – one comparatively public in the form of a Royal Commission, one an 'internal investigation' – empowered to investigate and report, but not to issue binding recommendations or make findings of criminal wrongdoing.¹

After releasing its final report, a Commission of Inquiry is effectively dissolved, and the ball is placed in the government's court as to whether and how to respond. It is in the vested interests of governments not to broadcast their own scandals or shortcomings, and this, coupled with the swift migration of the media to more current stories, tends to mean that inquiries and the events they examine quickly fade from the public eye. The tendency to treat an inquiry as the final chapter in a scandal rather than the launching point for public dialogue and meaningful reform contributes to a sort of voluntary amnesia or collective apathy, evidenced by repeated calls to "get on with things" or "look forward,

not backwards”. One consequence of this is that governments face no real or sustained pressure to take seriously the recommendations of commissions of inquiry. Another consequence is that the stories of those victimized by national security scandals are often overlooked, and their voices effectively silenced, both by the aforementioned media migration and by the nature of inquiries themselves, which tend to focus on the actions or inactions of officials and systems. The often-horrific accounts of the people whose lives were interrupted and irrevocably altered by the actions of the Canadian national security state tend to get lost in a sea of sound-bites or buried in mountains of paperwork – and there they remain, unless someone takes the time and care to piece them together and present them to the public.

This is precisely what Kerry Pither has done in *Dark Days*. Written in a compelling journalistic style, her book presents the collected accounts of the victims of A-O Canada and related operations – Maher Arar, Ahmad El Maati, Abdullah Almaki and Muayyed Nureddin – who were ‘rendered’, imprisoned, and tortured with the knowledge and complicity of Canadian officials. Pither references the public inquiries into these events, but her focus is on the lived experiences of the men and their families. Based on five years of extensive interviews, *Dark Days* is a carefully-researched and well-documented volume that provides a human perspective on these cases, supplementing the public record with descriptions of the sights, sounds, and smells of Syrian and Egyptian prisons, and the thoughts and feelings of the men detained and tortured there. The accounts often make for uncomfortable reading, as well they should. For example:

In the beginning, the cell had seemed like a refuge for him. Now it was another form of torture. Each day that passed felt like a year. The worst thing, he says, was not knowing what would happen next. “Were they going to kill me? Were they going to torture me?” Finally, he had what he calls a nervous crisis: “I got to a point where memories would crowd my mind, one after the other, one after the other, very quickly, and then I’d just scream. I would lose control and scream for ten seconds. My heart would start beating wildly. After that I could not breathe well and felt dizzy. This happened a few times ... and no one responded”, Maher says. (p. 227).

... Haitham asked the other man to get a cable, then ordered Muayyed to crawl into the corner and bend his knees so his feet were in the air. Haitham took the cable and whipped the soles of Muayyed’s feet. The pain, Muayyed says, feels like hot water is being pouring [sic] on a bad burn. “It’s like fire on your skin. I

was screaming and begging him to stop, but he just kept beating, beating, beating”. (p. 341).

These narratives reveal the details of experiences that are often sanitized through the application of euphemisms like ‘extraordinary rendition’ and ‘enhanced interrogation’. They describe sequences of events in which individuals find their assumptions about the nature of government and the sanctity of human rights violently ruptured by the intrusion of naked force. I was particularly moved by Pither’s description of Almalki’s account of the first physical abuse he experienced at the hands of his captors in Damascus:

Then it came. A slap, hard, across the face.

Abdullah’s whole world shifted at that moment. For the first time in his adult life, he had no control. His skills, his confidence, his upbringing couldn’t help him now. There was no negotiating with these people. This was a totally different world. “That slap changed everything. He took away my humanity and crushed my dignity”, he says. (p. 117).

Dark Days is structured around chronologically-organized sections within larger thematic chapters, and this format allows the reader to develop an understanding of the flow of events and interconnections between the cases. The text jumps back and forth between the claustrophobic and isolated carceral spaces in which the men were detained and tortured, and the halls of power in Canada in which Canadian officials managed their involvement in the cases. This structure effectively breaks down the artificial boundaries constructed between the bureaucracy ‘here’ and events ‘over there’, tying experiences to official actions and inactions. Pither is unafraid to name names or to draw conclusions based on her analysis, though she makes a point of acknowledging the presumption of innocence in her discussion of the actions of government officials – ironically, the same presumption that was clearly denied the men whose stories she tells. Importantly, she also draws attention to the role played by journalists willing to act as stenographers to power as opposed to a responsible fourth estate in matters of national security. Pither insists on the importance of historical context, arguing that incompetence and downright maliciousness that characterized national security investigations in the post-11 September 2001 context must be understood in relation to general government pressure to be seen to ‘do something’ about terrorism, and, more specifically, in relation to the desire to overcompensate for the “Ressam effect” (p. 35).²

The text begins with an Author's Note, in which Pither suggests that the purpose of the book is to present the four stories, and in so doing ask whether and to what extent the presumption of innocence has become a casualty of the so-called 'war on terrorism' (p. xvii). This certainly seems to have happened in these cases, which are tied together by the theme of guilt by association and by fluid transitions from official suspicion to coercive force in the absence of anything resembling due process. It must be underlined that, despite their arrest, imprisonment and torture, none of the four men – all Muslims, coincidentally – were ever charged or convicted of any wrongdoing, much less involvement in terrorism. Presently, they occupy the position of perpetual lingering stigma that is associated with persons alleged – but never demonstrated – to have connections to terrorism by a government; innocent, but forever tarnished by the experience. Maher Arar remarks on this in his forward to the text, noting that "these stories are real; they happened to real people, people who have wives, children, parents, and friends. They all have been harmed in different ways, but the harm has been profound and lasting. [They] satisfied the need for a scapegoat, for some sort of proof that the "war on terror" was going well" (p. xvi). Both Arar and Pither draw attention to the lingering effects of this mistreatment and perpetual stigma, in terms of physical and psychological impacts on the men and their families, and in terms of damage to social status and employability.

It is difficult to criticize *Dark Days* based on its content, which is comprehensive and compellingly-presented, and certainly accomplishes what it sets out to do. Instead, my critique must take the form of a wish list of things that might have been addressed or included. For example, I would have appreciated the inclusion of a short chapter dedicated to situating these four cases of removal to torture within a broader socio-historical and transnational context.³ Additional commentary on past misconduct by the Canadian national security state would also have been useful. Beyond this, I would have liked to read some additional remarks from Pither about the activities of the activist campaigns that mobilized in support of these men, particularly with regards to public relations tactics and the pursuit of accountability. Pither herself was a principal figure in the formulation of these movements and a public spokesperson. Most of all, I would have liked to see some broader engagement with the literature on prisons and torture, and particularly on victim accounts. Having stated these wishes, I note that including these elements would have required considerably more than 460 pages, and would likely have reduced the accessibility of the text. Further, it might well have detracted from the central storytelling goal of the book.

Ultimately, Pither has provided us with a rich compilation of

narratives about a period of *Dark Days* in the history of the Canadian national security state, and her text ought to serve as a launching point for analysis, contextualization and further exploration. Above all, the accounts presented here should serve as an antidote to collective amnesia. We have yet to tackle many of the broader issues raised by these cases, and have accepted platitudes and assurances in place of concrete reforms. This may be possible for those whose knowledge of Canada's involvement in extraordinary rendition is limited to official accounts and intermittent press coverage, but it is hard to imagine complacency in the face of the visceral accounts presented in *Dark Days*.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Actions of Canadian Officials in Relation to Maher Arar, chaired by Justice Dennis O'Connor, was established on February 5, 2004. O'Connor issued a voluminous report on September 18, 2006. O'Connor exonerated Arar of any wrongdoing, and, based on conclusions drawn by Commission fact finder Professor Stephen Toope, formally acknowledged that he had been subjected to physical and psychological torture at the hands of his captors. Because the terms and conditions of the Inquiry were tied to an examination of the RCMP, O'Connor was limited in his ability to speak about the role that other Canadian agencies – much less foreign agencies – played in the mistreatment of Maher Arar. The Internal Inquiry into the Actions of Canadian Officials in Relation to Abdullah Almalki, Ahmad Abou-Elmaati and Muayyed Nureddin was established on December 11, 2006, and was chaired by the Honourable Frank Iacobucci. This Inquiry was considerably less public. Iacobucci released his final report in October 2008. The public versions of these reports, although limited in scope, provide invaluable insights into the events surrounding the systematic abandonment, dehumanization and torture of persons deemed suspicious by a government eager to protect cross-border trade by appeasing its Imperial neighbour by appearing to 'act tough' on terror in the post-11 September 2001 context.
- ² Ahmed Ressam, dubbed the "millennium bomber", was an Algerian refugee claimant who was stopped by a United States customs inspector trying to cross the Canada-U.S. border in 1999. He was carrying explosives and bomb components, and later confessed to planning to commit acts of terrorism at the Los Angeles International Airport. Ressam had been under investigation by CSIS for some time, but Canadian officials were unaware of the particulars of his plans. The case became a symbol to Americans of the perceived threat posed by terrorists based in Canada. Despite the absence of a 'Canadian connection' in the September 11, 2001

terrorist attacks, Canadian officials felt pressure to respond to renewed anxieties about ‘infiltration from the north’, resulting in both an amplified securitization of migration policy and the ‘better safe than sorry’ mentality that governed A-O Canada and related operations.

- ³ Note that Pither does include some commentary on other Canadians subjected to official abandonment in the contemporary context, including Abousfain Abdelrazik, who was only recently repatriated from a Kafkaesque legal limbo in Sudan that resulted from the Canadian government’s refusal to advocate on his behalf.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Mike Larsen is a PhD candidate in Sociology at York University and Co-managing Editor of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP). He is also a Researcher at the York Centre for International and Security Studies (YCISS). His work deals with contemporary policies of indefinite and preventive detention, with a focus on the Canadian context, and with issues of secrecy and access to information. In 2007, he coordinated the *After Arar Workshop Series on Security Intelligence and Human Rights*, hosted by the Nathanson Centre on Transnational Human Rights, Crime and Security. Readers interested in viewing the archived videos of this series can find them online at <http://nathanson.osgoode.yorku.ca/programmes/after-ar-security-intel-and-human-rights>. Mike can be reached at mlarsen@yorku.ca or through the *JPP* office.

The Absolute Violation: Why Torture Must Be Prohibited

by Richard Matthews

Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press
(2008), 238 pp.

Reviewed by Sandra Lehalle

State torture is certainly not a new phenomenon, but even if we could make ourselves believe that it is a rare and random practice exclusive to exotic countries, recent disclosures on the 'war on terror' force us to confront the reality of its use in 'western' democratic countries. Even more troubling than the shocking images of the treatment of detainees in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo, is the documentation produced in order to support, more or less blatantly, such practices. A full spectrum of memos, essays, editorials and articles from lawyers, journalists, academics and others were written to produce arguments supporting the use of torture with more or less restrictions. In what could be described as a semblance of a debate, the opponents of torture seem to have been either less outspoken, less persuasive or often disregarded through a qualification of their arguments as emotional or purely abstract. In this context, the work of Richard Matthews is not only relevant and refreshing, but also crucially needed. In his book *The Absolute Violation*, the author not only attempts but succeeds in building a powerful argument against torture.

The Absolute Violation offers a rich in-depth analysis of the distinct justifications put forward by the defenders of state-sanctioned torture by drawing from multidisciplinary research, victim's and torturer's testimonies as well as philosophical classics. The most salient contribution of the book is its solid and thorough argument for an absolute prohibition of torture that does not even require an open appeal to human rights. Furthermore, by unveiling the weaknesses of the contemporary reasoning in favour of torture, Matthews does away with any exception that could be used to justify it.

The first chapter aims to better understand torture, its definition, its nature and most importantly its consequences. The reader will find in this chapter an innovative and interesting analysis which presents torture as an attack on human dignity. Although the human dignity argument is commonly used against torture, the author goes a lot deeper and shows how gender, sexuality and ethnicity – cornerstones of human identity and dignity – are inevitably the targets of the attack. Following this line of thought throughout the book, the author draws our attention to the broad range aspects of torture: psychological, medical, sociological

but also economic, racial and gendered. In doing so, this book provides us with a unique analysis of the consequences of torture, the way it attacks the entire structure and identity of the torture victim, his social attachments, his family, his community and also those of the politician and the torturer. It further demonstrates that the harm caused by torture is complex, intergenerational and widely spreads throughout the whole social structure.

After laying the foundations of his argument, Matthews tackles, in the second chapter, the most popular argument in favour of torture: the “ticking bomb scenario”. He explores all its structural components one by one – imminence, threat, necessity and the like – and thoroughly demonstrates their logical weaknesses, both historically and conceptually. The author also addresses, in the third chapter, the moral theory that is most used to support torture: utilitarianism. Putting aside the controversy and the objections that utilitarianism can provoke as a principle in itself, Matthews accepts to explore this avenue to conclude that a real utilitarian analysis leads inevitably to opt against torture.

The author makes a clear demonstration that the arguments used to justify torture only pretend to be utilitarian and consequentialist, and also fail to examine the real consequences. Mathews meticulously addresses the issues of what it would really mean to embrace effective torture in terms of policies, institutions and practices. He explores in-depth the inevitable institutionalization of torture that would occur if we were to accept its practice even on the ground of ‘exceptional circumstances’. By addressing the issues of evaluating the pain caused, training the torturer and the adoption of a ‘good practice’ of torture, he unveils the necessary routinization and therefore institutional and social harm that would be produced. Mathews reveals that state torture can only be systemic and institutional.

The fourth chapter proposes an interesting discussion about the tragic choice dilemmas that leaders and politicians can encounter and which could justify, for some, the ‘dirty hands’ scenario. Although Matthews does not deny the possibility of such dilemmas, he demonstrates that torture cannot have virtue-building properties and that ‘dirty-hands’ politicians cannot really exist as moral characters. He renders evident the fact that torture can never be justified or excused by tragic choices. To cover the full range of arguments on this issue, the author even includes, in the last chapter, a short analysis of the inadequacies of the excuses and justifications proposed on the legal side of the debate.

The Absolute Violation is a thorough analysis that does not cut any corners and does not take the easy road. Instead of simply challenging the premises of the arguments in favour of torture, Matthews goes all

the way and attacks the arguments themselves and their conclusions, leaving no issue unexamined. Step by step, he destroys brilliantly the myth of purely interrogational torture to reinforce that torture is always “terroristic” and that, in fact, the arguments for torture are arguments for terror. Specialists and beginners alike will find compiled in one book all the main justifications for torture and, most importantly, all the necessary material to counter them efficiently. In my view, the book must become an essential reference on the moral justifications of state-sponsored torture.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Sandra Lehalle has been an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa since 2007. She holds a European doctorate in Law and a Canadian PhD in Criminology. Her research interests lie in the policies and practices of detention by the State, including the ill-treatment and torture of prisoners. Through her research, Lehalle examines the complex relations between State authority and society by focusing on the role played by politics and the law – at the national and international levels – in the legitimizing process of State power and of its privileged repressive device: the prison

COVER ART

Daniel was born and raised in El Salvador. He was an undergraduate student in Fine Arts at the National University at the height of the civil war. He was detained and tortured twice as a political prisoner in the late 1980's in San Salvador, after which he and his family came to Canada as refugees. An artist, musician and actor, Daniel obtained a Performing Arts Diploma from a Canadian college and is a lay minister in a Christian church in Canada. Internationally, Daniel is a tireless supporter of youth art programs as well as an advocate for peace and social justice.

Front Cover: Untitled

While the artist prefers to let people create their own interpretations of his paintings, he offers these brief highlights of the illustration. Although life is a net in which people depend on each other's support and on nature's generosity, we sometimes lose our sensitivity and our compassion. When selfishness corrodes our respect and consideration for one another, control and violence taint our relationships and render them oppressive. We then forget that we all have the same rights and in dividing ourselves, social chaos erupts with power prevailing in the hands of a few who crush others with their darkness, their evil silence, their macabre plans and their sinister laughter.

Back Cover: Untitled

The portrait depicts the artist's feelings amidst the turmoil of his life in the aftermath of torture. It expresses a time when he was full of anger, depression, rejection, despair, and lamentation over the many broken and scattered pieces of his life. It also conveys the source of energy that he senses especially from his nurturing grandparents who represent sacredness and safety for him, enabling him to look at life with real meaning while keeping him afloat.



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