

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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Life under Pinochet: “They were taking turns to electrocute us one after the other”
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The first time Lelia Pérez felt the sear of a cattle prod it was at the hands of a Chilean soldier. She was a 16 year old high school student, used as a guinea pig to help Pinochet's security services hone their skills in torture. They didn't even bother to ask any questions.

“They would teach them how to interrogate, how to apply the electricity, where and for how long. When they were torturing me, I went into my own world - it was as if I was looking down on myself - like it wasn't happening to me. It was brutal,” she said.

On September 11, 1973, Augusto Pinochet seized power in Chile by force. In the days that followed his military coup, hundreds of people, were rounded up and taken to the two main sport stadiums in the capital, Santiago.

Lelia told Amnesty International how she was arrested along with 10 of her classmates and taken to the Estadio Chile (now called Victor Jara after the singer who was imprisoned there). There detainees were kept in the stands, with their hands tied, with soldiers constantly pointing machine guns at them.

“You would quickly loose sense of time as lights were constantly on. The only way we knew if it was day or night was by the food the guards were eating,” she said.

While they watched, special booths were constructed. It was in these that the worst of the torture took place. Lelia spent five days in Estadio Chile. Finally she was released with no explanation, pushed out onto the streets late at night.

“I was forced to wear the clothes of people we had seen being killed. There was a curfew and the few people around just walked away from us. The street was full of brothels and the sex workers took me in. They bathed me and gave me clothes. I went in the stadium as a 16-year-old and left as a 60-year-old.”

Those days of horror would only be the beginning of a long, incredible story that took Lelia through some of Pinochet's darkest prisons. She was held in detention on three separate occasions over a two year period; each time abused and tortured by soldiers of the brutal Pinochet regime.

A country of terror

When Lelia was released from the Estadio Chile, her country was almost unrecognizable. Pinochet had imposed a number of restrictions on his citizens and thousands of social activists, teachers, lawyers, trade unionists and students were being detained and held in dozens of clandestine centres across the country.

Undeterred by her experience, Lelia enrolled in the Universidad Técnica del Estado, noted for its political activism, to study history.

But she paid a heavy price and her freedom was short lived.

One night in late October 1975, Pinochet's political police knocked on her door once again. She and her boyfriend were arrested.

“They made me leave the house in handcuffs and they put me in a car. They put tape on my eyes and made me wear dark glasses. The tape was so I couldn’t see where they were taking me and the dark glasses, so people on the street wouldn’t know I had been taken.”

Behind closed doors

The car drove around 30 minutes outside of downtown Santiago to Villa Grimaldi, an old colonial weekend house. It had been taken over by the DINA - Pinochet’s political police - as a centre of detention and torture.

“They took us to an interrogation room where they had a metal bunk-bed. There was another detainee on the top and my partner was tied to the side. They were interrogating all three of us at the same time, taking turns to electrocute us one after the other. The interrogation session lasted through the night to the next morning.”

In Villa Grimaldi detainees would be electrocuted, water boarded, had their heads forced into buckets of urine and excrement, suffocated with bags, hanged by their feet or hands and beaten. Many women were raped and for some detainees, punishment was death.

For detainees, the dark, damped cell they were held in was the only world that existed and, in time, a sense of community emerged.

“After an interrogation you would be thrown back your cell. They would shut the door and then first thing you would experience is someone coming closer, they would hold you, help you lie down, take the blindfold off, and put some water on your lips. The electric shocks would make you stream with sweat and you’d get extremely dehydrated - so very, very thirsty,”

It is estimated that 4,500 people crossed Villa Grimaldi’s doors. Many never made it out and of those, hundreds are still missing.

Lelia spent the best part of a year in Villa Grimaldi. She was then transferred to a labour camp where she was held for another 12 months before she was forced to leave the country in late 1976.

Over a decade later, when Pinochet was ousted after a general referendum, she returned to Chile and to Villa Grimaldi in an attempt to come to terms with the past. Now the colonial house is now a cultural centre for the local community.

“We have turned this place of destruction into one of construction. This house of torture and death has now become a space that promotes life.”