

# Recordar. Violación de derechos humanos: una mirada médica, psicológica y política,<sup>1</sup> by Paz Rojas.

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The text, published with the help of the University of Oslo, is a compilation of lectures and essays by Dr. Paz Rojas, a Chilean doctor, an international expert in the fight against torture, who at 85 years' old, is still actively collaborating as Vice President of the Comité de Defensa de los Derechos del Pueblo [Committee in Defense of the Rights of People] (CODEPU). It will soon be 40 years since that November in 1980 when CODEPU was founded. The organization subsequently spread across the country and had working teams in some of the main Chilean cities, providing legal and psychosocial assistance to victims of torture. CODEPU is still integrated into many platforms of contemporary struggles for human rights.

Paz Rojas was a friend of the family of President Salvador Allende and experienced firsthand the military coup and the years that

followed. She was arrested by the Chilean intelligence (DINA) in 1974 and had to go into exile until 1980, working in those years as a therapist for Chilean exiles in France. Her most well-known text, *Torture and Resistance in Chile*, was born from that experience and it was originally published in French. Her model of understanding work with torture survivors is based on the consideration of the therapeutic task as an integral part of the whole political struggle. From Paris, Paz Rojas gathered the testimony of exiles who arrived as therapy, but also with the aim of not only teaching others to resist torture in case they were detained, but in order to politically denounce torture in international institutions. In 1988, the plebiscite that ended the military dictatorship would take place.

The reader should not expect from this book an academic or a research text. It is a collection of short essays (mostly between two and five pages) written as reflections from practice. They reflect on a series of universal themes:

- society split by the dictatorship and the way in which fear generates attitudes of submission and acceptance of the status quo without criticism; the alienation of the victim by society and the resulting double victimisation as someone who represents a danger; the silent majority in front of the militant minority in a society that Paz Rojas does not hesitate to qualify as sick and pathogenic. Psychological War understood as the propaganda raised to create affinity with the repressor and distance with the dissident. The omnipresent silence in which people know but remain silent in a combination of fear with guilt and hostility.
- the difficulties of putting into words traumatic experiences, the dilemma between telling or not, between silence to avoid pain and dissociative reactions

<sup>1</sup> Remember. Violation of human rights: a medical, psychological and political outlook.

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(labelled at that time as *Acute Exogenous Reactions*), criticism of the concept of post-traumatic stress and the impossibility that it includes the breakdown of trust in the human being, the violation of dignity, the clash with cruelty and the breakdown of human bonds, the isolation, the shame and the pain that remain indelibly, and above all the persecutory image of the torturer that is linked to the deep experience of the torture survivor. Particularly shocking is the case described on pages 151 and following on the manner in which torturers of the Air War Academy were acquitted of very serious crimes for which there was evidence and witnesses because the Chilean Legal Medical Service concludes in their expert reports that at the present time (years after torture) there were no signs of full post-traumatic stress disorder in some of the claimants and therefore torture could not be proven.

- criticism of a relevant part of transitional justice initiatives carried out in Chile. Her disenchanted vision of the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation (Rettig report) for its forgetfulness of the victims of torture, her rejection of the *Mesa de Diálogo* with the military and her critical view of the mandate, composition and results of the Truth Commission on Political Prison and Torture (Valech Commission). Her main criticism to all these processes is that they are strategies that do not recognise the suffering of victims with names and surnames but rather outline and dilute them, and that they serve as a guarantee for impunity by not collecting the names of the perpetrators or generating processes of justice.
- the perpetrator as someone dehumanised, accustomed to cruelty, that obeys without questioning and

who is offered power and covered by an umbrella of impunity.

- impunity as a pathological element that deepens the wounds of torture by denying it, creating the impression that what the victim experienced is not real and did not happen, that society does not recognise it and that individual dignity is sacrificed in the name of a supposed collective benefit. Impunity, in the opinion of Paz Rojas, generates clinical syndromes of equal or greater severity than torture itself: anomie, impotence, frustration, alienation, loss of sense of belonging to a sick society that prefers to deny and not face the past. As part of it, the experience of Pinochet's detention in Chile and the battle surrounding his extradition to Spain and the expert assessments that were made to try to prove whether or not he could face justice.

The book in short is a set of small experiential texts that dot a whole life trajectory dedicated to militancy from clinical practice, illustrating many phenomena that have somehow transmuted over time but in essence, have not changed.

As Nora Sveaass indicates in the prologue, her struggle against impunity in the 80s -and her insistence on the right and need to care after torture- have been important for the general understanding of these issues -both amongst groups of health professionals - but also in the legal sphere - in relation to accountability and justice.

For those of us who have lived through at least part of the time recounted, Paz Rojas' book is crossed with intense emotions. Those that convey the honesty of a life dedicated to the struggle for human rights.