



Leonardo E. Maturana Bañados
La Providencia

RECLAIMING HISTORICAL MEMORIES

On May 15, 1976, I was exiled from Chile to the United States. In the years that followed, I joined other survivors of political repression to turn the torture center where I was detained into a site of historical memory.

In the years that followed, former torture survivors, their families, and friends came together to expose the hidden legacy of disappearance and torture. We reclaimed that site for the survivors, renamed it *La Providencia*, and transformed it into a bridge between the past and the present day. Now, the center is no longer an open secret, but instead a publically recognized museum.

During the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, *La Providencia*, at that time part of the Catholic Church, leased part of their facilities to the secret police. There, hundreds of political opponents were illegally detained and tortured.

I was jailed in the basement of *La Providencia*, but I could hear the world outside: children playing, trains passing, and even the bells of the church ringing. These sounds actually helped prisoners—blindfolded and disoriented— identify the location of their imprisonment. But surprisingly, even though the government never concealed its crimes at *La Providencia*, there are no public memorials to recognize it. *La Providencia* operated for eight years with total impunity.

In 2015, survivors formed the organization *The Agrupación por la Memoria Histórica Providencia-Antofagasta*. Many former political prisoners, students and artists joined. The group performed street theatre, held vigils, and interviewed witnesses. They also met with the

National Council of Monuments who, in turn, opened an investigation into the crimes committed at *La Providencia*.

However, the investigation hit a big roadblock. The police still controlled the building and refused to admit outsiders. The council was unable to investigate former prisoners, look for forensic evidence, or make a floor plan of the building. If investigators had been able to conduct a thorough inquiry, they would have discovered the extent of the Church's involvement and its possible complicity in this crime. In one sense, this investigation could have exculpated the church; but, without it, the church also appears to bear some responsibility.

Then, for unspecified reasons, the police department reversed its position and allowed former prisoners and council representatives to enter. Two weeks later, the investigation was complete and the councilmen approved the petition allowing *La Providencia* to become a memorial site.

Our organization is currently discussing what to do with the recovered space. We envision a place where people can come together both to remember the struggles of the past and to confront the problems of today: wealth inequality, environmental degradation, indigenous struggles, homophobia, and xenophobia.

I think back on my life in exile and feel satisfied that I was able to use my experience to expose atrocity and support my fellow prisoners. But for me, even as Chile moved from dictatorship to democracy, the bells of *La Providencia* drown out the bells of freedom. While Chile seems intent on moving forward, I found myself looking back, filled with painful memories. I realize that reclaiming my story is an ongoing journey.

Though I never had the chance to say “goodbye,” I have discovered a part of my country that I thought I lost. Sometimes the connection feels weak, but I have never let go of it.

Leonardo E. Maturana Bañados (b. 1949) was born in Chuquicamata, Chile. While teaching in a local high school he was arrested and imprisoned by the military junta.

Following his political exile to the United States, he continued his education at the University of Arizona, completing a BA in Geography. Since then, Maturana Bañados has pursued local political causes, supported human rights, and raised a family.