Chilean exiles put it into words

Flight from Chile: Voices of Exile

By Thomas Wright and Rody Oñate
239 pp.
University of New Mexico Press, $31.50

and a body to remember with

By Carmen Rodriguez
166 pp.
Arsenal Pulp Press, $15.95

BY JENNY MACDONALD

I remember the day one of my childhood friends revealed to me that she came from Chile, and that I had no idea where or what it was. I heard her speaking in Spanish when she was calling her family to explain she would be late from school, and this was slightly confusing to me because Chile was not Spain.

I knew her mother was here and her father was there. And I knew that on a large wine rack in their dining room, there was always a single bottle of champagne. When I asked why they never drank the champagne, she told me they were saving it for when the dictator fell. I remember nodding with the solemnity the situation seemed to require and pretending I knew what she meant.

Is the bottle finally empty now? The dictator, Gen. Augusto Pinochet, was ousted and now with his arrest, 25 years after his coup on Sept. 11, 1973, our minds are fresh with newspaper photographs showing the weight of memory on the faces of Chileans around the world. Sadly, Chile's story is the predominant narrative of the 20th century. Growing up, I was to learn many times what the word "dictator" meant, even if, as children, it was only possible to understand the stories of individuals, of people, and not the statistics or the politics of right and left.

At this critical time in their nation's history, it is the narratives of such individuals that are captured in two recent books to emerge out of the suffering of Chile.

Flight from Chile: Voices of Exile is the first book to collect the oral testimonies of Chilean exiles, some still living abroad, and others who have now returned home. The survivors' memories are harrowing testimonies of a horrifying past that is still vivid, and the details of friends killed, of nights on embassy floors, and of lives on the run have a new resonance in these first-hand accounts. But what is most disturbing in this catalogue of horrors is the matter-of-fact tone of the narrators, indicative of a world where terror is commonplace. In one terrifying understatement, the exile José Silvia says of his 12-day detention: "We were tortured, but nothing else happened . . . all of us were released without any problem."

The expansive attempt to capture the diversity of experiences of the 200,000 Chileans who ended up in 140 different countries, as well as those who were "internally exiled" underground, is fleshed out with historical background charting the roots of the coup to the present day. The authors Thomas Wright, professor at the University of Nevada, and Chilean journalist Rody Oñate, do not ignore the complexities of Chilean politics in their accounts. The Allende government is presented as far from perfect and Cold War polarizations are avoided. The initial international compliance and, in the United States, active encouragement of Pinochet is also not left out.

If the book is slightly unbalanced demographically, this is a pitfall of its focus on the community of exiles. The majority of these were from the intellectual and professional classes, students, journalists, and professors, and many of the exiles do explain in their testimonies that working-class experiences would have been different. It is worth remembering, too, that countless people committed suicide in exile and their individual stories will never be heard.

Carmen Rodriguez, a self-described Chilean-Canadian, represents this group through an unnamed character in her story *3-D*. In her short-story collection, *and a body to remember with*, she does not situate her characters in the grand edifice of Chilean history, but focuses instead on the details of their internal tensions. She explores the struggles inherent in living a "hyphenated" existence between two worlds, concentrating for the most part on Chilean exiles in Vancouver. The stories appear as fragments, sometimes only a few pages long – a style appropriate to the fragmented lives she explores.

By linking her Chilean characters to those of Germans living in Argentina and Italians in Canada, she gives the themes of migration and displacement an appropraite universality. For the narrative of exile is also a narrative of the 20th century. When the United Nations High Commission for Refugees was established in 1951, it was assumed that the organization could disband in three years, after the refugees of the Second World War had been integrated into the societies in which they sought asylum. Instead, at the end of 1954, the refugee population was at 2.2 million. Today the estimate is over 19.8 million.

I had "to learn the story of a borrowed life," says one of Carmen Rodriguez's characters. But it is repatriation that proves even more difficult than expulsion, as exiles returned to a land incongruent with their remembrances and to Chileans who often saw them as deserters living in luxury abroad during their own difficult times.

Wright and Oñate explain that the regime actively promoted such a notion of a golden exile compared with the hardships of Chilean life. To a degree, there was truth in this. For some families, whose children had adapted completely to life abroad, return was all but impossible, even with the civilian government of 1989. These Chileans were exiles not of Pinochet, but of time.

But the greatest anguish for the exiles, indeed for anyone who survived the regime, often lies in unbanishable feelings of guilt at having survived at all. The first line of the exiled playwright and novelist Ariel Dorfman's memoirs, "I should not be here to tell this story" is a sentiment shared by thousands of Chileans. Few Canadians need to confront so clearly the question of why they are alive at all, but for many Chileans the answer is simple: Others died in their places.

For Chileans, these books are part of the mission of the character of Paulina, in Dorfman's play-turned-Hollywood-movie, *Death and the Maiden*: "The need to put into words what happened to us." For non-Chilean readers, there is a different lesson in these works. When we saw Pinochet arrested, we saw that one of our collective monsters is not much more than a sick, rather pathetic old man. Were he disfigured, genetically altered, or walking on four legs, perhaps the image of the monster would be easier to absorb. Instead, what we must accept is that he is as human as we are. One exile describes a torturer, Col. Egarbo, who liked to treat his victims to meals at fancy restaurants, and Gladys Diaz, a victim of torture for three months at the bloody Villa Grimaldi, says that the worst part was not the pain but "to realize in such a brutal way that human beings are capable of doing something so abberant to another person as torturing them." This is the real horror.

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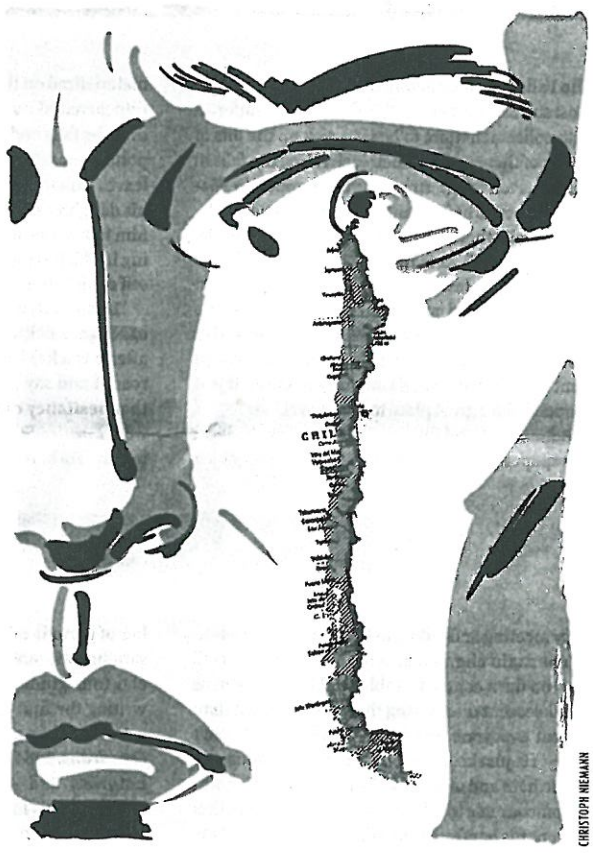

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