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Avenues of Memory: Santiago's General Cemetery and Chile's Recent Political History

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On September 4, 1990, six months into a democratic “transition” after 17 years of dictatorship, massive crowds of Chileans turned out to pay their respects to Salvador Allende on the occasion of his official burial in Santiago's General Cemetery. Since his death on September 11, 1973, his body had been buried in a private grave in the Santa Inés Cemetery at Viña del Mar. Now, after a ceremony in the national Cathedral, tens of thousands lined the route taken by his funeral cortege,¹ from the Plaza de Armas through the city streets and finally down the old Avenida La Paz toward the General Cemetery [Figure 1]. There Allende would end his long

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¹ In crowds that recalled Allende's famous words in taking leave of the Chilean people on September 11, 1973, when he assured them that “*de nuevo se abrirán las grandes alamedas por donde pase el hombre libre para construir una sociedad mejor....*” An extract from this message is graven within the monument above his tomb in the General Cemetery.

journey back from the coast and nearly a generation at the shadowy margins of national consciousness. It was the 20th anniversary of his election in 1970.

In the cemetery plaza—then shabby and neglected, as many public places had been during Pinochet's rule—President Patricio Aylwin and his entire cabinet addressed a massive crowd [Figure 2]. Despite the jeers of leftists held at bay outside the plaza by Carabineros, Aylwin celebrated the official reincorporation of Allende into Chile's political history:

Esta es una ceremonia de... reencuentro... con la historia patria, porque Salvador Allende—más allá de los juicios contradictorios que suscite – fue durante más de tres décadas uno de los actores más destacados del acontecer nacional. Diputado, senador, ministro de Estado, presidente del Senado, cuatro veces candidato a la primera magistratura de la nación y, finalmente, Presidente de la República de Chile, llegó a ser el líder más representativo de la izquierda chilena. Desde su perspectiva socialista y revolucionaria, encarnó las aspiraciones de vastos sectores de nuestro pueblo que anhelaban cambios profundos y drásticos hacia una sociedad más justa; luchó por ellas con coraje y dio su vida por lealtad a sus convicciones. Estos son hechos que nadie puede desconocer.²

After this ceremony Aylwin led mourners and dignitaries through the principal gate of the cemetery, past the striking expressionist statue on the tomb of Popular Front President Pedro Aguirre Cerda (1938-41) [Figure 3] and the cemetery chapel, proceeding north down the central O'Higgins Avenue, through the "Gothic Gallery," with its strange dark stone memorial marking the burial place of Bernardo O'Higgins for over a century [Figure 4] until his remains were removed by General Pinochet in 1979. Ahead, astride the central avenue, lay Allende's impressive new white mausoleum [Figures 5, 6], (past an older one of Veterans of the War of the Pacific, 1879-83, and near the massive tomb of President José Manuel Balmaceda, 1886-91 [Figure 7], whose government was defeated in the Civil War of 1891), where his remains were finally laid to rest.³ For Allende—a figure

² "Con ocasión de los funerales del ex presidente de Chile, don Salvador Allende G.," Santiago, 4 de septiembre de 1990, en Patricio Aylwin, *La transición chilena: discursos escogidos, marzo 1990-1992*, Santiago, 1992, 85.

³ *Cementerio General: Guía histórica y patrimonial* has photos of this and other memorials and tombs in addition to those included in this article. It was published in 2006 by the Ilustre Municipalidad de Recoleta (which administers the cemetery) and commissioned by Gonzalo Cornejo, its mayor. A handsome coffee-

held responsible by many for the economic and political crisis preceding the coup (including Aylwin himself, then President of the Senate), systematically vilified and ridiculed for nearly two decades by the state's new masters and media—it was restoration to a place of honor.⁴

Anyone present on that day understood that this ceremony also expressed the restoration of Chile's democratic tradition after the prolonged caesura of the dictatorship—and that the General Cemetery itself seemed singularly appropriate for that purpose. It was a place that conveyed a longer view of the country's national identity, strongly identified with its long-standing republican political institutions, a realm of official commemoration and expressive politics that complemented the amnesties, pardons and other instruments employed by political elites after national crises throughout Chile's history.⁵ Before Allende, for example, both O'Higgins and Balmaceda had been highly divisive political figures during their lifetimes who had died in disgrace but who were after a time (a generation for O'Higgins, just five years for Balmaceda) reincorporated here into a national narrative.⁶

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table volume with some historical background, it does not, unfortunately, serve as a handy guide for cemetery visitors. See also www.cementeriogeneral.cl. Other photos of recent memorials, in the cemetery and elsewhere in Chile, are to be found in *Memoriales en Chile: Homenaje a las víctimas de violaciones a los derechos humanos* (Santiago: Gobierno de Chile/Ministerio de Bienes Nacionales and FLACSO-Chile, 2007), a stunning collection of photographs by Alejandro Hoppe of more than 100 memorials, through the entire national territory of Chile; and in the insightful, illustrated essays of *The Art of Truth-Telling about Authoritarian Rule*, edited by Ksenija Bilbija, Jo Ellen Fair, Cynthia E. Milton and Leigh A. Payne (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 2005); see especially the articles by Louis Bickford, "Memoryscapes," 96-102, and Cynthia E. Milton, "Naming," 104-09.

⁴ Alfredo Joignant interprets the symbolism of the 1990 ceremonies for Allende in *El gesto y la palabra: Ritos políticos y representaciones sociales de la construcción democrática en Chile* (Santiago: LOM, 1998), 170-85.

⁵ These are analyzed with originality and insight by Brian Loveman and Elizabeth Lira in a series of studies, notably *Las suaves cenizas del olvido: Vía chilena de reconciliación política, 1814-1932*, second edition (Santiago: LOM, 1999) and *Las ardientes cenizas del olvido: Vía chilena de reconciliación política, 1932-1994* (Santiago: LOM, 2000).

⁶ See Carmen McEvoy, "El regreso del héroe: Bernardo O'Higgins y su contribución en la construcción del imaginario nacional chileno, 1868-1869," pp. 125-155 and Alejandro San Francisco, "La Apoteosis de Balmaceda: Desde la tumba solitaria a la Gloria (Santiago 1896)," 177-203, both in Carmen McEvoy, ed., *Funerales republicanos en América del Sur: Tradición, ritual, nación, 1832-1896* (Santiago: Ediciones Centro de Estudios Bicentenarios, 2006).



Figure 1: Allende's Cortège, *Grandes Alamedas*, September 1990.



Figure 2: Homage to Allende, Cemetery Plaza, September 1990.



Figure 3: Monument, Pres. Aguirre Cerda (1938-41).



Figure 4: O'Higgins Historical Tomb in General Cemetery.



Figure 5: Central Cemetery avenue toward Allende Monument.



Figure 6: Allende Monument astride central O'Higgins Avenue



Figure 7: President Balmaceda, Vanquished in Civil War (1891).

The cemetery is an extraordinary national space [Figures 8, 9: maps], a vast enclosed area of 86 hectares north of Santiago's central market.⁷ Walking its avenues and paths, patios and fields, any visitor will be reminded of its primordial purpose as the permanent resting place of some 2,000,000 souls. He or she will encounter other visitors, often in family groups, assembled around the tomb of a loved one. The cemetery's landscape of marble and stone is softened by rows of towering old trees along its grander avenues—and by the fresh flowers on graves, or a favorite toy of a child that died young, or the emblem of a favorite soccer club (Colo Colo predominating) in the humbler neighborhoods to the north [Figure 10]. Even in the more prosperous sections, *animitas*⁸ appear among graves,

⁷ For a national institution important throughout Chile's republican history, the General Cemetery has received scant scholarly attention. Marco Antonio León-León provides a historical and cultural perspective *inter alia* in *Sepultura sagrada, tumba profana: Los espacios de la muerte en Santiago de Chile, 1883-1932* (Santiago: DIBAM/LOM, 1997). See also Armando De Ramón, *Santiago de Chile (1541-1991): Historia de una sociedad urbana* (Madrid: Editorial MAPFRE, 1992), *passim*, and *Cementerio General: Guía histórica y patrimonial*.

⁸ Folk shrines.

tucked away amidst the formal masonry, statues and stained glass. *Votos* requesting or acknowledging spiritual intervention are scrawled on favorite tombs or affixed on scraps of paper. On the Day of the Dead the cemetery is thronged with families and groups such as volunteer units of *bomberos* in gala uniforms, perpetuating a tradition that has continued since the 19th century and humanizing this space with their living presence.⁹ The cemetery's avenues of memory are social as well as individual and personal.

The General Cemetery was created soon after Independence, in 1821, by the order of Bernardo O'Higgins on what had been a Dominican estate then outside the city (now in the modest Recoleta neighborhood).¹⁰ Starting in the 1870s, Santiago's most illustrious Intendente, Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, began to shape its current character.¹¹ It was one element in his visionary public works program to modernize Santiago—broad new avenues, channeling of the Mapocho River, public parks, markets and stockyards, improvements in water and sewage. The Avenida La Paz was constructed north from the river to a new plaza and imposing formal entrance, effacing its modest Spanish colonial-style origins.¹² Inspired by the cemeteries of Lima, Havana and Mexico City, Santiago's new cemetery announced the city's arrival among those grander cities and Chile's emergence among the Latin American republics. Inside the main entrance a visitor today encounters tree-lined streets [Figure 11] bordered

⁹ Some 700,000 people were estimated to have visited the cemetery on November 1, 2006, the Day of the Dead (*La Nación*, November 2, 2006).

¹⁰ There had been earlier cemeteries in Santiago (near the Plaza de Armas, for example), but in the colonial period those who could afford it were buried in church chapels, while those of more modest means were buried near the churches. Protestants were buried on the Cerro Santa Lucía in Santiago's historic center; their bodies were later moved to the cemetery's so-called *Patio de los Disidentes*.

¹¹ See Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna. "La Ciudad de Los Muertos" en *Chile: Relaciones Históricas*, ed. Rafael Jover (Santiago: 1877); Leslie Erhard Wehner Venegas. "Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna: 'Génesis de la transformación de Santiago,'" Tesis, Licenciatura en Historia, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, 2000.

¹² "[E]l monumento de mayor honra para Santiago. . . su cementerio aquel potrerrillo de alfalfa de nuestros abuelos, que fue en seguida un hacinamiento de nichos de adobe y de ladrillos, que hoy siguiendo paso por paso nuestro desenvolvimiento social i doméstico, es una ciudad de mármol, miniatura de una ciudad de palacios": Vicuña Mackenna, "Ciudad de los Muertos," 103.

by sumptuous marble tombs commissioned by the great families,¹³ the landscape becoming more modest and less park-like moving north, finally ending with the humblest graves toward its northern border. It is very different as a space from other national cemeteries, such as Arlington, with its simple, uniform white crosses (and scattered Stars of David) marching across the Virginia hills near Washington, D.C. It more resembles Père Lachaise in Paris,¹⁴ with its winding paths and old trees surrounding diverse notable figures of different epochs; but the General Cemetery is more comprehensive, more inclusive of a whole national history.

From its beginnings as a *panteón*—the resting place of its heroes—it quickly became a broader representation of Chilean national identity. As the construction in stone and mortar of historical memory, it contains the tombs of an extraordinary array of Chile’s most famous men and women—painters, sculptors, writers, playwrights, musicians, athletes, trade union leaders and a wide range of political figures from before Independence into the current millennium. Every president of republican Chile is buried there except O’Higgins, González Videla and...Pinochet. As a space of social memory its urban geography also faithfully recapitulates Chile’s deep structures of social class—as it records the rise and fall of the great and powerful over time. It reflects the historic importance of various collective identities (*gremios*)—the firefighters and veterans, different immigrant groups [Figure 12], religious Orders, trade unions, and all four branches of the Armed Forces. It also bears signs of Chile’s importance historically to

¹³ It had already taken on this character by the late 1870s: “Cuánta riqueza! Cuánta infinita prodigalidad de mármoles, de urnas, de pirámides, de ánjeles [sic] de dolor, de símbolos de la fe y de la esperanza! I al propio tiempo, ¡cuántos grandes nombres! – Freire i O’Higgins, cuyos apaciguados manes coronas con una sola mano la inmutable gloria. Prieto, espalda con espalda con Las Heras. . . . Pinto i Bulnes, reunidos como en un solo hogar de los cipreses”: Vicuña Mackenna, “Ciudad de los Muertos,” 95.

¹⁴ See Judi Culbertson and Tom Randall, *Permanent Parisians: An Illustrated Biographical Guide to the Cemeteries of Paris* (London: Robson Books, 2000; first edition, 1991), 7-91. Blanche M. G. Linden situates Père Lachaise within the broader development of cemeteries and burial practices in her marvelous *Silent City on a Hill: Picturesque Landscapes of Memory and Boston’s Mount Auburn Cemetery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press/Library of American Landscape History, 2007). Fred Goodman presents an evocative personal account of visiting a cemetery and the lives of individuals buried there in *The Secret City: Woodlawn Cemetery and the Buried History of New York* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004).

its other countries—recognition of its distinctive national experience long before Allende's Popular Unity and Pinochet's dictatorship.¹⁵



Figure 8: General Cemetery from Plaza, Avenida La Paz (partial).

¹⁵ See, for example, the plaques on the base of Aguirre Cerda's tomb, near the main entrance.



Figure 9: Recoleta entrance, “Desaparecidos” Monument (partial).



Figure 10: The Cemetery beyond Politics.



Figure 11: A Beautiful Street in the City of the Dead.



Figure 12: Collective Social Identities in the Cemetery.

If the General Cemetery is a site of social and personal memory, it is also a comprehensive repository of Chile's *political* memory—including the 17-year military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and Chile's prolonged "transitional democracy" since 1990. It bears mute witness today to the deep political divisions of this period—the latest exhibits of what is to a remarkable degree an open-air museum of Chile's longer historical memory. As might be expected, the cemetery conveys much continuity with the country's more distant past in the ways it has represented the upheavals

of recent decades. During this period the cemetery has also had a sustained significance as a space of expressive politics—of opposition finding new forms of solidarity during a regime unprecedented in its brutality and duration and dedicated to eradicating the old political culture. It has been an arena of collective action as well as a place of commemoration and representation.

Let us consider first what a visitor might glean about Chile's politics through the last three decades. Before reaching Allende's tomb, in the area just past the chapel near the main entrance, he or she would come upon three emblematic graves, literally within a stone's throw of one another: Jaime Guzmán (founder of the Independent Democratic Union-UDI, which occupies the far right of the country's party spectrum), principal author of the 1980 constitution for a "protected democracy"; assassinated by the leftist FPMR in 1991); Eduardo Frei Montalva (natural leader of the centrist Christian Democrats, President during the "Revolution in Liberty" of 1964-70; believed murdered by agents of the dictatorship in 1982); and Orlando Letelier (Socialist and Foreign Minister under Allende, a leading opposition figure in exile; assassinated by the DINA at Sheridan Circle in Washington, DC in 1976 and reburied in the cemetery in 1992).

All three were victims of specifically *political* violence, and their proximity in death is inescapably meant to evoke the political reconciliation between Chile's three political "families." All three had massive public funerals and their tombs were the sites of commemorative ceremonies in subsequent years. A visitor today will almost invariably find fresh-cut flowers on their graves, signs of living remembrance. That said, there are clear differences in the ways each is remembered. Letelier's simple black marble slab records his place of death as well as its date, adding *Yo nací Chileno, soy Chileno, y moriré Chileno* [Figure 13].¹⁶ Frei Montalva's grave is similarly austere ("*Una gran esperanza nos alienta*" and the symbol of the Christian Democratic party), evoking Chile's republican past [Figure

¹⁶ Beside Letelier's grave is the tomb of Emil Körner, the German officer responsible for the modernization of the Chilean Army after the War of the Pacific (an irony reportedly savored by Letelier's widow, Isabel Morel). Both face a monument to General Óscar Bonilla, a principal plotter in the 1973 coup, who represented an early rival to Pinochet within the military government and died in a helicopter crash in 1976.

14]. Guzmán, in contrast, is buried under an elegant marble tomb spanning several plots, erected by the UDI in 2001 on the 10th anniversary of his death to replace a simpler original grave. With its echoes of the Spanish *Falange* (“*Amó a Dios y a su patria*” on a beige marble wall behind a large cross), it seems to represent the Chilean Right’s defiant homage to values asserted during the long years of military rule but which have scant representation since the transition of 1990 [Figure 15].

Guzmán’s heightened presence appears to have resulted from the UDI’s capture of the *comuna* of Recoleta.¹⁷ However, a cemetery visitor today will be much less struck by the prominence of recent figures of the Right than the opposite. It is the opponents of the dictatorship, and its victims, that stand out: Carlos Prats, Pinochet’s predecessor as commander of the army, murdered in Buenos Aires by the DINA in 1974 [Figure 16]; Víctor Jara, the folk singer murdered in the National Stadium in September 1973 [Figures 17, 18]; Miguel Enríquez, the leader of the leftist MIR, killed by the DINA in 1974; labor leader Tucapel Jiménez, murdered by the CNI in 1982; Clotario Blest, a life-long defender of labor rights and emblematic figure for human rights during the dictatorship;¹⁸ the evocative memorial (“*Nunca +*”) to the victims of the leftist MAPU [Figure 19]; the memorial to the *Combatientes Internacionalistas*, Chilean leftists who fought in Central America; the massive Memorial to the *Detenidos desaparecidos y ejecutados políticos* [Figure 20]; and Patio 29, the burial site near the cemetery’s northern boundary of hundreds of anonymous victims from the early months of the dictatorship, proclaimed a National Monument in 2006 [Figure 21].

The large numbers of prominent opposition figures in the cemetery today reflect the brutality of the dictatorship, no doubt, but they also suggest the special character of this place. It has long given symbolic

¹⁷ Interview with Gonzalo Cornejo, Mayor of Recoleta, Santiago, 25.1.07. See also *Cementerio General: Guía*, 233. After years of effort, Guzmán’s admirers have successfully begun to install a gigantic memorial to his memory in the Vitacura neighborhood [www.memorialjaimeguzman.cl]. It is just west of the Rotonda Pérez Zúkovic, named for Frei Montalva’s Christian Democratic Interior Minister, assassinated by Left extremists in 1971.

¹⁸ Blest assumed this new role shortly after discovery of the bodies of some of the “disappeared” at Lonquén in 1978.

representation to diverse political currents after a period of deep division. This tradition of political reconciliation in death has been maintained under its current administration, associated with the UDI.¹⁹ It was at the initiative of the mayor of Recoleta, whose office administers the cemetery, that Gladys Marín, the leader of the Communist Party, who brought the first criminal suit against Pinochet himself in January 1998, received a prominent site near Allende's tomb at her death in 2005,²⁰ her memory evoked by an arresting modern monument with symbols of the Marxist tradition [Figure 22]. Similarly, in 2006, the mayor and his appointed cemetery director took part in the ceremony making the long-neglected Patio 29 a National Monument. No other space, save the Memorial to the Disappeared, was more identified with the dictatorship's victims, and the *agrupaciones* of their relatives had long sought its recognition. In a gathering of officials of Bachelet's government and representatives from the relatives groups, wearing photos of their dead and missing loved ones, these members of UDI's younger generation were a striking presence. The official sign erected at the site is starkly descriptive:

El patio 29 es un lugar emblemático de las violaciones a los derechos humanos ocurridos entre 1973 y 1990, pues es testimonio del procedimiento llevado a cabo para ocultar los cuerpos y las identidades de los detenidos desaparecidos y ejecutados políticos durante el régimen militar.

Algunas sepulturas de este patio señaladas como NN o desconocido, fueron el único rastro que permitió a los familiares de ó a los familiares el hallazgo de los cuerpos; son testimonios de la política de ocultamiento de los crímenes y son, por lo mismo, símbolos de la lucha por la verdad y la justicia para que NUNCA MÁS el derecho de la vida sea ultrajado.

¹⁹ For most of its history the General Cemetery was administered as an agency of the Ministry of Health. As part of the administrative decentralization carried out under Pinochet, it was transferred to the Municipality of Santiago in 1981 and subsequently to the newly-created Municipality of Recoleta.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 236. Cornejo wrote the Marín's son: "*Sería para esta comuna un verdadero honor que los restos de su madre reposaran perpetuamente junto a los de otros personajes como Luis Emilio Recabarren, Salvador Allende, detenidos desaparecidos y ejecutados políticos, Violeta Parra, Víctor Jara—sólo por nombrar algunos—sepultados en este Museo al aire libre que es parte integrante de nuestra historia y del pueblo de Chile.*" The monument was designed by painter José Balmes, architect Carlos Durán, and sculptor Hernán Peña. See http://www.pcchile.cl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=163&Itemid=2, accessed on 23.01.07.

The theme of political reconciliation is present throughout the guide to the General Cemetery produced at the behest of the mayor of Recoleta in 2006. All of the opposition figures and victims previously mentioned in this article are included in the guide and, indeed, dominate its sections on memorials and outstanding politicians of the 20th century. The commentary on the great Memorial to the Disappeared evokes human rights, the right to mourn and the need for reconciliation:

La creación de este memorial, junto con el de Villa Grimaldi, o el cambio de nombre al Estadio Chile, hoy Víctor Jara, han sido hitos que han marcado la discusión sobre los derechos humanos y que han permitido el reencuentro entre los chilenos. Desde el hallazgo de osamentas en Lonquén en 1978, los familiares de las víctimas pidieron que se levantara un lugar para recordar a sus seres queridos. El retorno a la democracia permitió que este anhelo se hiciera realidad y que sirviera como una reparación simbólica a las víctimas de la violencia política que sacudió al país en la década del setenta. Año a año llegan cientos de personas a depositar flores a sus familiares o a sus antiguos camaradas. Está aquí el memorial, para testimoniar una época que no debe repetirse en Chile, para testimoniar que la lucha de ideas no debe desembocar en una guerra fratricida dentro de una misma nación.²¹

A similar commentary accompanies the earlier monument to the 84 young opponents of Balmaceda killed at Lo Cañas during the civil war of 1891, “una [t]ragedia sin precedentes en la historia de Chile. Una [sic] episodio que no hay que olvidar; testimonio de las nefastas consecuencias cuando se cae en una guerra fratricida como la que ocurrió en Chile en 1891.” It goes on to describe the Lo Cañas rebels (“Pocos tenían preparación con armas y tenían una visión romántica de la revolución y la heroicidad”) in terms that echo much contemporary historical memory of the MIR and the Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez, FPMR.²² Similarly, the guide includes grim details on La Matanza del Seguro Obrero in 1938, when some 60 young Chilean Nazis took the Caja de Seguro Obrero (today the Ministry of Justice), firing on La Moneda, and seized the Casa Central of University

²¹ *Cementerio General: Guía*, 257. The guide also expresses appreciation for the national healing possible through the Rettig Truth Commission report and goes on to mention “el ‘nunca más’ del Comandante en Jefe del Ejército, general Juan Emilio Cheyre [2004], todas iniciativas que han permitido que las divisiones del pasado queden atrás y que hoy se mire unido el futuro.”

²² *Ibid.*, 258.

of Chile and were subsequently machine-gunned to death after surrendering by the *Carabineros* by order of rightist President Arturo Alessandri [Figure 23].



Figure 13: Orlando Letelier, Re-interred in Chile, 1992.



Figure 14: President Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964-70).



Figure 15: Second Tomb of Jaime Guzmán Errázuriz, 2001.



Figure 16: General Carlos Prats and Sofía Cuthbert.



Figure 17: Former Niche of Folksinger Víctor Jara.



Figure 18: A Place of Living Memory (Víctor Jara).



Figure 19: *Nunca Más* (MAPU Monument).



Figure 20: Monument to "Disappeared" and Politically Executed.



Figure 21: Patio 29, Now a National Monument (2006).



Figure 22: The Evocative Grave of Gladys Marín.



Figure 23: The Cemetery's Signage is Terse.

Broadly speaking the General Cemetery has historically been inclusive rather than exclusive—much more defined by all that is there, socially and politically, than by what is not. Taking it as a whole, this can be seen as an expression of a certain tradition of pluralism or tolerance as a positive value in the national culture. In this sense the incorporation of former rebels and the cohabitation of former political enemies suggest a posthumous symbolic reconciliation within Chile's historical identity. Admittedly, this interpretation might not occur to a casual visitor. As an open-air museum of historical memory, the cemetery gives little curatorial guidance beyond minimal signage. The meaning one finds there depends a great deal on what one brings to it.

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A visitor should also understand that the General Cemetery is more than an open-air museum or place of private memory. It has also been an arena of collective action and expressive politics. Such was its role in a semi-clandestine way during the dictatorship and more openly with the

restoration of elected government, especially soon after transition. Under Pinochet it was a controlled space, particularly in the early years after the coup, when private burials (such as those of Víctor Jara and Carlos Prats²³) and furtive disinterment (carried out by authorities clandestinely in Patio 29 and other sites from the late 1970s into the early 1980s)²⁴ were the norm. The military did recur to the cemetery to honor its own, notably for the 1975 funeral of General Óscar Bonilla²⁵ [Figure 24]. But its more striking decision, in 1979, was to remove the remains of Bernardo O'Higgins from the site within the cemetery's late nineteenth-century Gothic Gallery [Figure 25], where they had rested for more than a century, and place them in the “*Altar de la Patria*” (where they joined the “*Llama de la Libertad*” erected in 1975) facing the Moneda presidential palace. The symbolism was patent: the dictatorship represented a “re-founding” of the nation based on its most traditional historical values, with Pinochet as a second O'Higgins. (It was completed the following year when Pinochet moved his office into the Moneda palace itself, restored from the devastation of 1973, now as Chile's President under the recently-ratified 1980 Constitution.)²⁶ The Altar of the Homeland and Flame of Freedom in

²³ After initial burial in a family tomb on October 10, 1974, the bodies of Prats and his wife were reinterred in 1975 in a tomb with an evocative sculpture by Mario Irrarázaval behind the collective mausoleum of the *Carabineros*. “Esa fue la primera vez que se hizo un acto público con muchos fotógrafos que no trabajaban para ningún medio de comunicación y muchos autos de gente que no formaba parte de nuestro grupo”: Edwin Harrington and Mónica González, *Bomba en una calle de Palermo* (Editorial Emisión, 1987), 472.

²⁴ These illegal exhumations by the military government were rumored at the time and long denied (as they were as recently as 2007 by cemetery personnel) but came to light after the transition to democracy. *La Nación* for December 15, 1991 bears early testimony to this illicit activity, which has been further illuminated through the efforts of investigating magistrates in the last 10 years.

²⁵ Bonilla received full military honors in the presence of the junta, which organized additional commemorations in the following years. Bonilla's funeral, some 18 months into the dictatorship, was also attended by numerous mourners of modest social backgrounds, reflecting his standing in Santiago's *poblaciones*. His grave is located just opposite Orlando Letelier and Emil Körner near the chapel and main entrance, and there is also a *plazoleta* in his name opposite the nearby collective Army mausoleum.

²⁶ As President of the *junta*, Pinochet had originally installed himself in the brutal modernist UNCTAD building built under Allende in 1972, then re-baptized with the name of Diego Portales, another of Chile's founding fathers of distinctly authoritarian bent. Joignant points out that Allende had attempted to enlist the figure of O'Higgins in the 1970 campaign of the *Unidad Popular*, along with that of Balmaceda (*Un día distinto*, 43-44).

the center of Santiago, on the Plaza Bulnes between the different ministries of the armed forces, were a new site of public, patriotic, and military celebration during the dictatorship and a point of protest from dissidents then and for the first decade of elected governments.²⁷

Under military rule it was the opposition that increasingly used the precarious public space of the General Cemetery for religious acts—funerals, marches and *romerías*—which expressed political solidarities as well as private grief. The funeral for Pablo Neruda, who after a long battle with cancer died of heart failure on September 23, 1973, constituted in some sense the first public protest against the dictatorship.²⁸ Its place in militant memory is well-captured by the words of a woman who saw the event as a precursor to her activism during the dictatorship as a member of a human rights organization:

Durante la dictadura el cementerio se convirtió en un lugar de resistencia; cuando murió Neruda...los funerales fueron un acto político impresionante.... [S]e sobrecoge el corazón, porque cantar la Internacional con los puños en alto en medio de todos los milicos que están apuntando... ¡había que tener mucho coraje! [C]uando aparentemente no se movía una hoja como decía El General, había hojas que se movían sin que él lo supiera. [E]sas hojas éramos nosotras que igual nos arreglábamos para juntarnos.²⁹

In fact, beginning early in the dictatorship followers of the proscribed parties of the Left held annual marches to the General Cemetery, ending at Patio 29, presumed burial place of hundreds killed by the regime for their political beliefs.³⁰ These annual marches became larger in the 1980s, accompanying the wave of massive street protests against the

²⁷ See Ximena Tocornal Montt, "Escenarios de la memoria en conflicto: A propósito de la Llama de la Libertad y/o Altar de la Patria y Memorial del Detenido Desaparecido y del Ejecutado Político," unpublished ms., SSRC Project "Memoria Colectiva y Represión," Santiago, Febrero 2000. In contrast to the General Cemetery, the *Altar de la Patria* and the *Llama de la Libertad* created a ceremonial space which demanded constant armed protection from a special unit of the *Carabineros* against the depredations of dissidents. See *Ibid.*, *passim*.

²⁸ Neruda's remains were moved in 1974 to a niche in the cemetery's northern wall, which has remained a site of homage even after they were moved again, in 1992, to his home on the Chilean coast, in Isla Negra.

²⁹ Quoted from an interview with a leader of the ODEP (*Organización de Defensa del Pueblo*) by Tocornal Montt, August 1999, *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁰ Tocornal Montt, p. 31; Joignant, *Un día distinto*, 49, 67, 71.

regime,³¹ and were complemented by the funeral crowds for slain dissident figures—such as opposition labor leader Tucapel Jiménez, in 1982—to the General Cemetery. When *Carabineros* murdered a student, Rodrigo Rojas Denegri, in July 1986 [Figure 26], his funeral “brought together aggrieved *pobladores* and 1970s-style respectable public figures, including high Church officials and human rights clergy, lawyers and professionals, into a single commemorative process.”³² In the General Cemetery, angry mourners exploded a bomb at the Pinochet-Hiriart family tomb³³ [Figure 27].

The cemetery’s status as a space significant during the dictatorship as well as Chile’s longer national traditions was reflected in Allende’s reburial there in 1990. For the newly-elected government of the *Concertación*, it was a uniquely apt site in which to re-legitimize the different political currents it represented, part of a broader enterprise of expressive politics and what the Rettig Truth Commission report would, the following year, call for as symbolic forms of “reparation.”³⁴ Another

³¹ Tocornal Montt quotes a militant: “Nosotras íbamos a la romería al cementerio desde el 11 de septiembre del 74 pero creo que empieza a ser más estructurado y más organizado cuando empieza la lucha active contra la dictadura, a partir del 83. Yo he estado en marchas pequeñísimas, marchas casi clandestinas, que nos reconocíamos por signos, alguna con una guitarra, poner un cassette o escuchar una canción de la UP, incluso una vez canté en el cementerio, canté en la tumba de Violeta Parra” (Interview, 1999, *Ibid.* 21).

³² Stern, Steve J. *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet’s Chile, 1973-1988* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006; Book Two of the Trilogy, *The Memory Box of Pinochet’s Chile*), 281. Stern’s book is a magisterial interpretation of the emergence of “memory” during this period and of its importance to the democratic opposition that developed in the 1980s—indispensable for anyone who would understand the dictatorship and how Chileans lived it.

³³ According to cemetery personnel, who claimed it was bombed a second time on the anniversary of September 11th. The first bombing was also remembered by a mourner present at the cemetery. The author was unable to find confirmation of these bombings in contemporary journalistic sources. Stern’s book, which makes illuminating use of contemporary media sources, notes the existence of self-censorship even in the late 1980s: for days after Rojas’ death and horrendous burning of his companion, Carmen Gloria Quintana, at the hands of *Carabineros* in July 1986, the national channel, TVN, evaded all coverage of this very public event and its aftermath (*Memory Struggles*, 300).

³⁴ See *Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1993; Spanish original, 1991), Vol. II, 838. The range of the *Concertación*’s use of symbolic policies is considered in Alexander Wilde, “Irruptions of Memory: Expressive Politics in Chile’s Transition to Democracy,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 31

emblematic case was that of Orlando Letelier, first sent into internal exile at Dawson Island and then expelled, to be assassinated by the DINA in 1976. In November 1992 his remains were returned to Chile from Venezuela, where he had been buried. The words on his grave in the General Cemetery—*Nací Chileno...*³⁵—spoke to Chile's larger tragedy of the many tens of thousands of driven into exile by the dictatorship. Even into the present century, the cemetery remained a space for commemorative acts addressing major unresolved issues. In September 2004, for example, General Prats was given full military honors at the cemetery in a ceremony led by Army commander General Juan Emilio Cheyre—one of a series of important symbolic gestures carried out by Cheyre to distinguish the contemporary Army from its role during the dictatorship and restore its institutional integrity.³⁶



Figure 24: General Óscar Bonilla (Letelier right, background).

(1999) 473-500; in Spanish in Anne Pérotin-Dumon, ed., *Historizar el pasado vivo en América Latina*: www.historizarelpasadovivo.cl.

³⁵Taken from a speech by Letelier in Madison Square Garden just five days before his death, upon learning that the dictatorship had expunged his citizenship. See *La Época*, 5 de noviembre de 1992, 16.

³⁶ Observers present, however, noted a formality in the act that contrasted with the fervor expressed at the funeral of General Pinochet in December 2006. On the latter, see Alfredo Joignant, *Un día distinto: Memorias festivas y batallas conmemorativas en torno al 11 de septiembre en Chile, 1974-2006* (Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 2007), 129-73.



Figure 25: O'Higgins *Ausente* and Visitors, "Gothic Gallery".



Figure 26: Niche of Rodrigo Rojas de Negri.



Figure 27: Family Tomb Pinochet-Hiriart.

The cemetery's two distinct qualities as a public space—its particular meaning for the opposition under Pinochet and its longer historical character expressive of political reconciliation – both shaped the project to construct the Memorial to the Disappeared,³⁷ which occupies a prominent site just within a cemetery entrance from Avenida Recoleta.³⁸

Although the visitor's eye is drawn to the massive marble wall—with some 4,000 names flanking that of Salvador Allende Gossens, “Presidente de la República” with his dates—it is in fact a mausoleum as well as a monument [Figures 28, 29]. Below the plaza facing the wall, with its symbolic sculptures, extend two lower walls to hold the remains of *detenidos-desaparecidos* on one side and *ejecutados-políticos* on the other. Although these walls only contain 400 niche vaults, less than 185 have been filled as of 2008. There is no curatorial comment to explain this discrepancy between the small number of occupied vaults and what are believed to be more than a thousand other victims whose bodies have never been found or identified, whose remains the military regime destroyed or threw into the sea.³⁹ As a mausoleum the memorial does serve as a site for private and group devotion, attested to by flowers at individual vaults and photos of lost loved ones at the foot of the wall, but as a memorial it is remarkably *escueto* in its evocation of Chile's historical memory.

³⁷ This Memorial in fact distinguishes between two different groups of the dictatorship's victims: those “disappeared” while in detention and those killed for political reasons (formally, extra-judicial executions). For the sake of simplicity, it is referred to here as the Memorial to the Disappeared.

³⁸ This side entrance to the cemetery off Avenida Recoleta is far more used by Chileans visiting loved ones than the main entrance at the foot of Avenida La Paz. It is nearer the more modest, less ceremonial graves in the cemetery's central and northern sectors and just a block from the “Cementerios” Metro station (which also serves the Catholic Cemetery across Recoleta Avenue).

³⁹ This barbaric latter practice, long rumored, was initially documented by the official *Mesa de Diálogo* (1999-2000) and later by the official Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (2003-04), the work of which continues in 2008 a successor body.



Figure 28: A Wall of Names of the *Ejecutados Políticos*.



Figure 29: Open-Air Mausoleum below the Wall.

The process to construct the wall involved essentially three sets of actors: the Aylwin government, architects and artists, and the relatives' groups.⁴⁰ For all of them, although in different ways, the General Cemetery was a particularly appropriate site, given its association with repression and resistance during the dictatorship. Discussions began before the transition, the first stone was laid in September 1990 and the memorial was inaugurated in February 1994, at the height of the Chilean summer vacation period and in the absence of any government official of higher rank than sub-minister. The project was fraught throughout these years with intramural conflicts among the three groups of actors and with public as well as private confrontation with the armed forces and their political allies.⁴¹ Even after being inaugurated the memorial remained subject to change and emendation (of the names included on its wall, for example)—the periodic erasures, additions, scaffolding and netting (observed most recently in January 2006) serving as an inescapable metaphor for the social construction of historical memory and its still-tentative quality in Chile, even a decade and a half after restoration of democracy.

For the relatives' groups—the remnant of the movement for human rights⁴²—the cemetery retained its special significance as a focus for solidarity. After 1990 their marches of pilgrimage, which had been directed to Patio 29, shifted to include the monument to Allende and then the Memorial to the Disappeared. The march of September 11th, 1998, after Pinochet had become a Senator for Life (and was no longer Army Commander), was the most violent in years, but that of 1999, when Pinochet was under arrest in London, one of the most peaceful. It ended with a vast crowd before the Memorial which included individuals and social groups far beyond the *agrupaciones*⁴³—a moment in which the violation of human rights under the dictatorship seemed a larger truth,

⁴⁰ Tocornal Montt provides a useful brief description, 25ff.

⁴¹ See Wilde, "Irruptions of Memory," 484ff. On private military resistance to the memorial, see Ascanio Cavallo, *La historia oculta de la transición: Memoria de una época, 1990-1998* (Santiago: Grijalbo, 1998), 220.

⁴² The Catholic Church's *Vicaría de la Solidaridad* was disbanded in 1992. The Chilean Commission for Human Rights, based in the parties of the *Concertación*, became inactive after the transition.

⁴³ See Tocornal Montt, *Op. cit.*, 39.

assumed as an issue for Chile as a society and not merely a problem for the families and friends of its worst victims.

In the years since the Memorial has become less significant as a central symbol of solidarity and of commitment to fundamental human rights – at least for Chileans (compared, say, to international visitors). In part this seems due to the quickening pace of commemoration under the Lagos and Bachelet governments, when a growing number of other memorial sites—such as the notorious DINA prison camp at Villa Grimaldi, the statue of Allende in the Plaza de la Constitución and the restored door in the Moneda palace at Morandé 80—effectively dispersed historical memory throughout Santiago and indeed the whole national territory.⁴⁴ Another part of the explanation is simply the passage of time. As the specific meaning of the General Cemetery for the generation that experienced the dictatorship as adults is gradually being lost, its established historical culture is reasserting itself.

A final factor seems to be that the Memorial to the Disappeared and the Cemetery more generally are most strongly associated with the direct victims of the dictatorship—the vast majority of whom were of the historical Left. For Chileans as a whole the Memorial has yet not become a site visited by a cross-section of this society that is so strongly segmented by class and political loyalty. Nor has it become a broadly-accepted symbol affirming fundamental human rights, as distinguished from its public recording of unacceptable state practices during a delimited historical, increasingly distant period. Even for some who identify with the Left, the Memorial's stark acknowledgement of named individuals that were killed or disappeared by the state—which was meant to re-establish their human

⁴⁴ Alexander Wilde. "Chile's Way in Memorialization and Democracy," paper delivered at the International Conference on Memorialization and Democracy, Santiago, 20-22 June 2007; <http://www.flacso.cl/flacso/>. The ministry of *Bienes Nacionales* in 2007 produced *Un catastro para la memoria*, a listing of more than 500 sites of detention and torture under the dictatorship (found at http://www.bienes.cl/memorial.asp?seccion=39&contenido=1346&ID_PADRE=1). See also *Memoriales en Chile: Homenaje a las víctimas*, Op. Cit.

dignity—has come to seem insufficient, because it treats them as *victims* rather than celebrating the ideals they believed in.⁴⁵

* * * * *

Santiago's General Cemetery has been a commemorative site that bears witness to Chile's recent history to an unusual degree. It is a national symbolic space that today conveys much of the country's coming-to-terms with this violent and deeply-conflicted period. It had a particular significance during the Pinochet dictatorship as a place of unofficial memory and social solidarity—a meaning extended into the early years of the democratic transition. To a visitor its representation in stone of what was for so long *memoria prohibida* is striking—a remarkable incorporation into national history of proscribed public figures and what were in some sense non-persons. Although the dictatorship of 1973-90 was unprecedented in its repressiveness, longevity and ambition, the cemetery today bears witness to its reintegration into a longer national narrative. This has been achieved at some cost, above all by its predominating framing of *political* reconciliation within a history of repeated (and occasionally “fratricidal”) political conflict—which is the cemetery's tradition. In the Memorial Wall and Patio 29, its emphasis on human suffering during the dictatorship conveys a distinctly partial truth about the exceptional character of Pinochet's regime—politically and morally—in Chile's longer history.

The General Cemetery's historical truths about this recent period are also partial in another way: they reflect the unbroken rule since 1990 of

⁴⁵ See, for example, Tocornal Montt, 34. This has been an important theme in debate over memorials and historical memory in Argentina as well as Chile. See, for example, the insightful article by Federico Guillermo Lorenz, “Tomála vos, dámela a mí: La noche de los lápices, el deber de memoria y las escuelas,” in Elizabeth Jelín and Lorenz, eds., *Educación y memoria. La escuela elabora el pasado* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2004), 95-129. Controversies in both countries illustrate the complexities of attempting to do justice in historical memory to both state violation of their human rights (“victims”) and political militancy. See also Macarena López and Esteban Aguayo Sepúlveda, *De víctimas a santos: Detenidos desaparecidos y ejecutados políticos* (Santiago: Gobierno de Chile/FONDART, 2003).

the political forces that opposed the dictatorship.⁴⁶ Most of the prominent newer tombs and memorials are theirs. While some figures of the dictatorship are present in the cemetery's public spaces (such as General Bonilla and the chief martyr of the Right, Jaime Guzmán), others were only buried in the more secure spaces of the *gremial* mausoleums of the armed forces [Figures 30, 31] (such as three of the escorts killed in the 1986 assassination attempt on Pinochet and the *Carabineros* killed after the 1973 coup). It was as if the military accepted its limited historic place within the cemetery, with its overwhelmingly civilian population, and was more disposed to establish new ceremonial ground (as with the remains of O'Higgins) to mark its break with the long republican tradition. When Pinochet died in December 2006, his ashes were interred on a family property at Bucalemu on the coast,⁴⁷ not in the General Cemetery. According to cemetery officials, his family did not even approach them about burying him there.⁴⁸ His absence, and that of the many prominent civilian officials of his regime still alive, means that to a visitor, the cemetery's story is largely that of the victors of 1988⁴⁹ (who were the vanquished of 1973). Whether the victors of 1973 will yet see their day remains in the future. With so much precedent, it would be bold, indeed, to predict with confidence that Pinochet will never find his place there.

But this should not be the last word. Although the General Cemetery has changed with time, it has been and will remain a place of *re-encuentro*. Its inclusion of the martyrs of the *Concertación* marked an important recognition of their human dignity and their significance within Chilean history. It was a public and official recognition important to those to whom it was so long denied (as were the Rettig and Valech truth commission reports, in 1991 and 2004). It went beyond politics and conveyed a belief

⁴⁶ It is certainly possible – if ultimately unknowable – that the recent conciliatory gestures taken by the cemetery's local administrators toward Gladys Marín and Patio 29 would not have occurred if Joaquín Lavín and the UDI had won power in the national elections of 2000.

⁴⁷ See "Bucalemu: Un cementerio muy particular" in *La Tercera Reportajes*, Sunday, 9 December 2007, 24-25.

⁴⁸ Gonzalo Cornejo, Mayor of Recoleta, believed their decision was based on the attempted profanation of the Pinochet-Hiriart family tomb in 1986 (interview, January 25, 2007).

⁴⁹ When a ringing majority of Chileans voted "No" in a plebiscite to General Pinochet remaining in power an additional eight years.

that there were values above those represented in political identities and conflicts. Mere representation, of course, has its limits, but the cemetery will also remain a place where the living visit and remember the dead, bridging generations back into time, away from the bustle and “presentness” of life in urban Santiago, a place of reflection, contemplation and remembrance [Figure 32]⁵⁰.

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Figure 30: Carabineros Mausoleum

⁵⁰ Garry Wills brilliantly evokes this purpose in his *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), which situates the graveyard of the fallen there within the larger 19th C. movement to make cemeteries social, park-like places connected to life. Linden, *Silent City*, provides an illuminating history of this movement.



Figure 31: Plaque within *Carabineros* Mausoleum.



Figure 32: A Living Space Bridging the Generations.

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