

Portrait of a torturer

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Next Thursday Chileans will go to the polls to elect a successor to General Pinochet, who has ruled with an iron fist since the overthrow of Allende in 1973. Whoever wins will face a dilemma – whether to prosecute military personnel for human rights abuses. During the 1970s Andres Valenzuela, right, served in a death squad which hunted and killed Chilean Communists. Most were tortured before they died. Valenzuela now lives among other exiles in France. **Iain Guest** talked to him there

Portrait of a torturer

NEXT Thursday's elections will mark a red letter day for tens of thousands of Chileans who have been exiled by Pinochet's harsh rule. Many are already eagerly making plans to return home. But for one Chilean exile, Andres Valenzuela, Thursday will be much like any other day — long, boring and lonely. It will pass in a succession of aimless walks and endless glasses of beer in the picturesque little French town where he has sought refuge.

It's only when you've heard his extraordinary story that you realise this is no ordinary man. I found myself surreptitiously studying him. Does he

face show courage and conviction — or does it betray guilt? Are those eyes shifty, or merely tired? Certainly, he seems too slight of stature to have handcuffed heavier men and hauled them up by their wrists to hang, agonisingly, from hooks. Too unsettled to have been a torturer.

During the past 16 years, by conservative estimates, 782 Chileans have disappeared, another 2,000 have been killed, and several thousands have been tortured. Valenzuela took an active part in this dirty war. He served in a shadowy military death squad that kidnapped and murdered scores of Chileans. But he has also confessed, and this makes him special. Valenzuela could be a

star witness for the prosecution in the event of any inquiry into human rights abuses by the next Chilean government.

Torturer. The word is bald, impersonal. But what of the person behind the label? How did Andres Valenzuela get sucked in, and what prompted his change of heart? These were the questions I wanted to put when I sought him out in France. I'm not sure I have all the answers. He was direct and helpful, but he also steered me away from his personal life. He knows that words, too, can wound. His disclosures have already caused several deaths, and every time he talks it reminds the world of his unsavoury past. Other Chilean exiles in France still find it hard to accept him. As he says, "I have very few friends."

How does a torturer get started? Valenzuela's experience suggest — disturbingly — that it could happen to anyone. He was born into a lower-class family in the small seaside village of Papudo where his father caught conger eels for the tourist restaurants. It was, remembers, Andres, a happy, uncomplicated upbringing. In April 1974, seven months after the coup which brought Pinochet to power, he arrived at the Air Force base of Colina on the outskirts of Santiago to begin his two years of military service. He was just 18.

After three months at Colina the young recruit was posted to the Academy of Aerial War in an affluent Santiago suburb. Valenzuela's dirty war was about to begin. He was assigned to what was vaguely described as "guard duty," warned not to talk about his work and taken down to the basement to start. "I was very, very frightened" he recalls. Blindfolded, handcuffed prisoners were crammed

they seized a Young Communist leader named Miguel Rodriguez Gallardo. Gallardo had pulled himself up from poverty by sheer force of personality, tapping the electricity lines that ran above the shanty town and reading Marx by the light. He was mercilessly tortured, blindfolded and trussed up in a cupboard for four months, but he refused to break.

Valenzuela was fascinated by Gallardo's willpower, and as their relationship changed Gallardo established a subtle ascendancy over his young captor. On one occasion, Valenzuela arrived in a torture room to find Gallardo hanging by handcuffs from a hook and whimpering. Valenzuela touched his arm: "I'll let you down." "Don't," replied Gallardo. "Wally might come in, and you'd be in trouble. I'll stick it out."

One important Communist still eluding capture was Jose Weibel, Secretary General of the Young Communists, and the Joint Command decided to try and locate him through his brother Ricardo, a bus driver. Ricardo Weibel was seized and brought to the base for 12 days of rough treatment, before being released and sent home. Then an order came to pick up Weibel again "I had to hide my dismay when Weibel was bought back without a blindfold — a sure sign that he was to be killed." Sure enough, soon afterwards Weibel and Gallardo were pushed into a van.

VALENZUELA was told to burn their ID cards, wallets and spectacles. Before they left, Gallardo shook Valenzuela's hand and thanked him for the cigarettes he had given him in captivity. It was a wrenching moment. "I admired

savage officers. They pushed the body off the cliff, but it caught in bushes. Valenzuela, holding on to the killer's hand, dislodged his friend's corpse. "I looked down and thought he'd let me fall too."

The Joint Command began taking risks. Jose Weibel, Ricardo's brother, was snatched off a bus in broad daylight while travelling with his family. The man who succeeded him as Secretary General of the Young Communists, Carlos Contreras Maluje, was picked up after putting up a struggle in the street. As people crowded round, Valenzuela and the others bundled Maluje, kicking and screaming, into a car. The injured man was taken back and beaten up before being taken off and killed.

With this, the free-wheeling murder came to an end. Maluje's spirited resistance had provoked such an uproar that the muzzled Supreme Court issued a habeas corpus order to locate him — the first against the Air Force since 1973.

But did Valenzuela himself participate directly in torture? He was certainly present on many occasions. Every detainee was tortured, irrespective of age, sex or background. Valenzuela admits to beating prisoners at the moment of their detention, hauling them to the torture rooms, watching them writhe and holding them down. He also handcuffed prisoners, swung them up on hooks and watched them dangle. All this constitutes torture under international law. But he also insists that his main task was to deliver the prisoner to the torturers, who were specialists in interrogation with long experience in the service.

Not all the interrogators were veterans. The ferocious "Wally" Fuentes Morrison only

rison let him know that his skills were once again required for a special operation. Several members of the left wing Revolutionary Movement, MIR, were hiding out in a residential safe-house. On the evening of September 7 a small army of security agents, including Wally and Valenzuela, began converging on the house.

Around 9 pm they opened fire with a heavy machine gun. At the same time, Andres Valenzuela shot out the street lights. The attackers then called by loudhailer on those in the house to surrender. A young man came out with his hands in the air. Two agents ran up and shot him dead. As soon as the shooting stopped, Valenzuela was told to pull the body away from the house. He then went in and found the body of a young woman. By the time he had pulled the corpse out into the street, Valenzuela's clothes were stained with blood.

IT WAS a full year before he made the break — but eventually, on August 21, 1984, he went over to one of the more independent local magazines, Cauce, and asked for its leading journalist Monica Gonzalez. The resulting interview was heavy going for both of them. Monica had been a close friend of Ricardo and Jose Weibel. Now she was listening to their kidnapper. What she remembers most was his self-disgust and terror. Monica rang lawyers at the Vicariate of Solidarity, which had been set up by the Catholic Church in 1975 and was by now Chile's leading human rights organization. The lawyers took Valenzuela off to record his testimony. A few days later, Va-

strongly implies that this loophole could allow him to resume the case after elections, in which case Andres Valenzuela could be a key witness.

If, that is, Valenzuela can ever return to Chile. This has been open to doubt since June 8, 1989 when an extreme left-wing group pumped 20 bullets into Valenzuela's former chief, "Wally" Fuentes Morrison. Valenzuela's testimony had confirmed Wally's involvement in several brutal killings, and Valenzuela's first reaction was that he had unwittingly taken yet another life. His second reaction was gut terror that his former comrades would come looking for him.

Valenzuela insists he's willing to return to Chile. "There

is", he says, "a lot more to tell."

By a strange twist of fate, the first Chilean to welcome Valenzuela to his new home in France was Castro, a "Mirista" who was captured in broad daylight and stripped to his underwear back in December 1974, while Valenzuela stood guard at the corner. Castro has swallowed his doubts and hired Valenzuela as a cook in his small restaurant. It is one of the few gestures of real friendship encountered by this lonely man in his long and tormented odyssey.

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to dormitories and passages, many wearing Air Force uniforms. These officers had been loyal to Allende.

The young conscript was broken in slowly. He did not attend torture personally, but he found his natural aversion to mistreating a defenceless person gradually being eroded. The prisoners in the basement were dehumanised, blindfolded, anonymous "subversives".

It was in the War Academy that Valenzuela learned how to detain, interrogate, and exploit the fears of prisoners — while psychologists looked for weaknesses in the young draftees and wedded out those who seemed sentimental. Valenzuela himself was promoted from guard duty to acting as a back-up in kidnapping operations.

These early months gave him a brutally clear idea of what lay ahead. He knew that kidnap and torture were a blatant violation of the Chilean military code and that under the same code he was entitled to register any reservations with a superior officer. But he never protested. Why? "What could I have said? That I was not in agreement? That I would have been killed."

In Mid 1975, the counter-intelligence services of the Navy, Air Force and Police linked up to form the "Joint Command against Subversion", and began working out of two suburban safe-houses, or "nests". The Command's strength rarely exceeded 25 men, but they were carefully selected for their ferocity and reliability. The man who commanded the Air Force unit, Roberto Fuentes Morrison, was a fanatical anti-Communist known as "Wally". He was ruthless with anything short of total obedience.

The Joint Command began to hunt down prominent Communists, and on August 28, 1975,

Gallardo the most", says Valenzuela. "He was brave until the very last moment."

Valenzuela's only real friend was another recruit named Bratti. Bratti's brother had been drafted at the same time.

Within weeks of Gallardo's murder, Valenzuela found himself taking part in Bratti's execution. Bratti had been discovered spying for a rival security service. He was dragged, bundled into the boot of a car and driven to a canyon on the outskirts of Santiago. As Valenzuela took off Bratti's handcuffs his friend murmured.

"It's cold tonight". Valenzuela choked out a reply and watched while Bratti was shot by "Fifa" Palma Ramirez, one of the most

joined up after the 1973 coup. Bratti tortured. Even a prisoner named Carol Flores, who turned informant, tortured. Valenzuela himself was instructed in interrogation techniques.

Whatever his personal misgivings, Valenzuela hid them well and when his compulsory military service ended he signed on for a permanent career in the Air Force. In 1978, in an attempt to wipe the slate clean, Pinochet declared an amnesty to cover all human rights abuses since the coup. Valenzuela felt reassured.

Between 1976 and 1983, he rose steadily through a series of promotions and posts in Air Force security. Then in September 1983, "Wally" Fuentes Mor-



Gallardo, the Young Communist leader who was tortured then killed — "I admired him most", says Valenzuela

lezuela remained underground. A massive appeal to the military hierarchy to return to the barracks had impact was swift and savage. First to suffer were the relatives of those who had been kidnapped by the Joint Command. They now knew the terrible truth, even though without a body they still could not mourn. They gave Valenzuela little credit for speaking out.

The impact on the Vicariate of Solidarity was even more violent. The Valenzuela file had passed to Jose Manuel Parada, a senior Vicariate official. On March 29 1985, Jose Manuel's inquiry came to a brutal end. He was picked up with two other Communists. The following morning, the three bodies were found near Santiago airport, with the throats cut.

Chilean justice was not totally intimidated. Judge Carlos Cerda from the Santiago Appeals Court was investigating the disappearance of several leading Communists and Valenzuela's testimony was the first solid proof that the security forces had been involved in kidnapping. Cerda interviewed those named in his testimony, including Wally Fuentes Morrison, and then threw down the gauntlet to Pinochet. Ignoring Pinochet's 1978 amnesty, he described the Joint Command as an "illegal association" and charged 40 of those implicated with "illegal deprivation of liberty." They included Andres Valenzuela.

The judge's colleagues in the Judiciary, however, had no wish to confront Pinochet. The Supreme Court charged Cerda himself with "lack of discipline", suspended him on half pay for two months, and replaced him by another judge who dutifully closed his case. Judge Cerda points out that the case remains technically open until he personally closes it. He