first met investigative journalist Mónica González Mujica in Santiago in 2004 while producing “The Judge and the General,” a PBS documentary about the first Chilean judge to indict Augusto Pinochet for murdering and kidnapping political opponents. Chilean co-producer Patricio Lanfranco and I interviewed González six times during almost three years of filming. She is the brightest light, a beacon, among the hundreds of people I’ve interviewed in half a century of reporting in print and on public television. Her work has been pivotal in the struggle for truth and justice in Chile.

After studying Latin American history in college and graduate school in the 1960s, I was hired to assistant produce a feature film in Chile during the 1970 presidential campaign. Dr. Salvador Allende, a long-time leader of the Socialist Party, won that election, enraging the Chilean right and high officials of the Nixon administration. The film, “¿Qué Hacer?” used documentary footage and fictional characters to explore, among other topics, democratic versus revolutionary socialism. Chilean actors portrayed leftists of various persuasions. A leader of the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR, Movement of the Revolutionary Left) appeared as himself from prison. American actors played CIA spies conspiring to prevent Allende’s election. Berkeley’s Country Joe McDonald composed the film’s music and served as a Brechtian chorus.

After returning to the Bay Area at the end of 1970, I spent the next three years reporting U.S. efforts to undermine President Allende’s democratically elected government. I contributed to publications ranging from Foreign Policy to the Report on the Americas of the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA).
On September 13, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet overthrew Allende in a violent military coup. Allende committed suicide in the presidential palace before soldiers could take him prisoner. In the following months, people I’d known would be killed, forced into exile, or would disappear. Jorge Muñoz, a cameraman on 3 Que Hace?, was kidnapped, never to be seen again. He may be among those tied to rails and dumped into the Pacific Ocean. I am godmother to the son of a friend who survived imprisonment and torture.

According to the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (Rettig Commission), the National Corporation for Reparations and Reconciliation, and the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture Report (Valech Report), between 1973 and 1990 a total of 3,227 people were disappeared or killed by the military government and its secret police, the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (DINA, National Intelligence Directorate), and more than 40,000 people were tortured and/or imprisoned.

Mónica González was among tens of thousands of Chileans who fled into exile. Born in 1949, she had grown up poor and joined the Communist Party as a young girl. At the time of the coup, she worked for El Siglo, the Communist Party newspaper. In fear for her daughters’ lives, she sent them into exile and then escaped herself. She lived with her daughters in France until 1978, when she returned to Chile, “obessed,” as she says, with the “death machine” of the Pinochet regime.

Her obsession has produced hundreds of interviews and articles and seven books. She has also edited several leading Chilean publications. In 2007, with her husband, journalist John Dinges, she founded the Centro de Investigación Periodística (CIPER), a highly regarded investigative website, and served as its director until 2019. She resigned the directorship for reasons of health but is still president of the nonprofit Fundación Valech, which created the Valech Report, a record of human right violations during Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship (1986-1992). The Vicaría was created in 1976 by the Catholic Apostolic Church and its religious institutions to defend and promote human rights in Chile. For decades, the Vicaría collected testimonies of victims and relatives of those imprisoned, disappeared, tortured, or killed during the military regime. In 2023, Bishop Víctor Chahín directed the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture, and Torturados por la Razón, a record of human rights violations during Augusto Pinochet’s military regime.

Mónica González: I was one of the first people Judge Juan Guzmán Tapia called to testify because in 1986 I had made public, with Ricardo García and Patricia Verdugo, the contents of a tape we called “Chile: Between Sorrow and Hope.” At the end of that tape is something that had been referred to crimes committed within a specific period. 1. In 1978, DINA established itself as the principal arm of repression of the Pinochet regime. In received technical, training, and infrastructure support from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. In the summer of 1975, DINA chief Manuel Contreras was even temporarily placed in the US to improve CIA operations.

1. The film can be viewed on YouTube in English, French, and Spanish.

The death of Judge Juan Guzmán on January 22, 2021, after years of staring into the abyss, she still believed in the human capacity for decency and indecency, between sensitivity and negligence or selfishness. There are those who justify the bad, deaths, regardless of where they come from. It could be a Communist who justifies crimes committed in the Soviet Union or, like here in Chile, where thousands and thousands of people justified the assassinations knowing they existed but without wanting to know.

There were also some who didn’t know what was happening because they were in their own world.

Judge Guzmán is not the only one, but he is an example. He was privileged. He likes to collect fossils; he likes ancient history; he’s refined; he has a French wife. He created his own refuge and buried himself there, and he had the luck not to be forced to confront reality. But because he is a decent, intelligent, and sensitive man, when he was confronted with reality, he had to decide whether to be a judge who does only the minimum or to commit to his new partners. They thought, “How can I fall in love again? What if he comes back?” For them, it was like killing the disappeared.

Some women started looking [for their husbands] — and they had to hear things like, “He left you for another woman, he was never detained. It’s a lie that he ‘disappeared.’”

In the February 25, 2004, interview at the office of Siete+7, González also discussed “Operation Colombo,” a 1975 DINA operation aimed at covering up the murder of more than 100 of the disappeared at a time when Pinochet’s government was under scrutiny for human rights violations by the United Nations, Amnesty International, and other international organizations. González had discovered the truth about Operation Colombo while investigating the assassination in Buenos Aires of General Carlos Prats, who had sought exile in Argentina after serving as Commander in Chief of the Chilean Army under Allende.

MG: In July 1975, newspapers like El Mercurio and La Nación had come out saying that those who had blamed the military junta for arresting and killing people had to bite their tongues. The “disappeared” had died because of killings among themselves.

EF: If you hadn’t gone to Argentina, we wouldn’t have learned the truth.

MG: The truth would have come out another way or someone else would have done what I did. I have a lot of 2. In other words, “If we kill Allende, we get rid of his followers.”

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4. Bishop Sergio Valech was a fierce defender of human rights in Chile. He assumed control of the Vicaría de la Solidaridad (Vicariate of Solidarity) during the last years of the dictatorship (1986-1992). The Vicaría was created in 1976 by the Catholic Church and its religious institutions to defend and promote human rights in Chile. For decades, the Vicaría collected testimonies of victims and relatives of those imprisoned, disappeared, tortured, or killed during the military regime. In 2023, Bishop Víctor Chahín directed the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture, and Torturados por la Razón, a record of human rights violations during Augusto Pinochet’s military regime.

5. Judge Juan Guzmán used the term “permanent kidnapping” to refer to those crimes that cast long as they are being perpetrated. In a kidnapping, the crime lasts for you to arrive. Now you’ll find it extinguished.

A burning lamp waited for a lifetime to be seen again. He may be among those tied to rails and dumped into the Pacific Ocean. I am godmother to the son of a friend who survived imprisonment and torture.

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I realized these are DINA archives. It's the only file from disappeared prisoner. There was her ID. The files show there was a systematic organization for the assassination of opponents of the Pinochet government, a decision to eliminate them brutally and leave no traces. The files show how they organized a "simulacrum" [fake newspaper story] to pretend the 119 disappeared had run away to Argentina, when the truth was they were killed inside Chile.

Between Sorrow and Hope

Some of those prisoners were dynamited, others thrown in the sea. I found names of the disappeared prisoners’ they’d killed in that way. There were also three names that didn’t appear on any list, and they became an obsession for me. It has been more than six months until one day, while I was reading the testimony of a survivor, I found something that said, “...and González arrived together with the Andrónico Antequera brothers.” And for the first time [the name of] Samuel González appeared. He had not been on the other lists [of disappeared prisoners]. It’s one of the most emotional stories for me because it’s only because I’m obsessive that my search helped discover that child — he was a very young man without a father or mother, an orphan. His sister was a cloistered nun, and we found that nun, who came out of her cloister only once — to file a case for her brother in the courts.

I felt that day that Samuel González lived. I am agnostic, but I felt that God put me there to find that ID, as if saying, “Mónica, you can’t rest until you find him.”

In 1991, I found the man who had held the list of names to those newspapers. His name was Gerardo Roa. He was chief of the Public Relations Department of the City of Santiago. I was then editor-in-chief of the newspaper La Nación. I received him saying, “What an honor.”

I said to him, “Close the door because what we have to say is private and I don’t want anyone to interrupt us.” Then I showed him the documents and asked, “What do you have to say about this?” The guy turned pale and began to perspire, and suddenly, he fainted.

I got him up and he started to recover and said, “Yes, Manuel Contreras [the head of DINA] personally...”

I asked him to deliver the documents. I was in Rio de Janeiro then and had contacts with the newspaper O Diario, I did. It paid for that edition.”

I said, “If you will declare this to the Rettig Commission,” I won’t publish it, but you must tell them everything. If you do that, I won’t publish. What we have found is that you established, for his death, some fake trials, and they made me leave. No breaks. I tape and tape and cry, alone, because there are bodies torn apart when I read the story of my friend David Silberman. It was the first time I saw it, handwritten. My friend. There was a death.

Those DINA files show there was a systematic organization for the assassination of opponents of the Pinochet government, a decision to eliminate them brutally and leave no traces. The files show how they organized a “simulacrum” [fake newspaper story] to pretend the 119 disappeared had run away to Argentina, when the truth was they were killed in Chile. The family had to accept that they must cremate him, that he could never be buried there. The times had changed. So he changed his dream to a grand Napoleon-style tomb inside the Military Academy. But the army didn’t accept that. And that’s interesting: today’s army didn’t accept him having a tomb inside the Military Academy.

The family had to accept that they must cremate him because his body would never be safe anywhere. As we have seen, more than one child or grandchild, more than one survivor of his crimes, someone who was tortured and survived was going to open that tomb so that nobody would ever find a milligram of his remains. But what I like is that nobody condemned him to suffer that. His own family did it out of fear. It’s incredible how history has changed.

MG: The first thing I thought on Sunday when I learned that General Pinochet had died, it was confirmed that he was going to be cremated, was that it was unbelievable. He won’t have a tomb! He condemned thousands of Chileans to be disappeared, to be thrown in the desert or in abandoned mines, so nobody would ever find them or remember them. And he — not because of the force of the bayonet, but because of the fear of his own people — will be another disappeared person. I don’t think that for many people, it’s still very difficult to believe.

In 1974, after the coup, Pinochet had built a great tomb, a mausoleum, in the cemetery at his mother’s request. But his mother died many years later, in 1986. And when his mother died, they buried her there, and soon afterwards, the grave was desecrated. Pinochet knew that he had no other country that he could never be buried there. The times had changed. So he changed his dream to a grand Napoleon-style tomb inside the Military Academy. But the army didn’t accept that. That and interesting: today’s army didn’t accept him having a tomb inside the Military Academy.

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Thirty-three years ago, those who were scared to death to their bones were those who opposed him, and he was the Almighty who declared, from some hidden spot in the headquarters of the coup d’état, “Se mata la persona pero…”

MG: I respect all opinions, but personally, I feel proud every morning for what we have achieved. And do you know what is sad? If we don’t appreciate the work that we have done all, the relativates won’t heal their wounds. Because if we keep saying we haven’t done enough, then what else should we have done? There’s no other country that had a dictatorship in South America that now has so many military officers in jail as we do in Chile, and there will be more.

The following interview took place on December 15, 2006, five days after Augusto Pinochet died of a heart attack in the hospital where he was being treated. In December 2004, ruled that Pinochet was medically fit to stand trial andindicted him and placed him under house arrest. By 2006, other Chilean judges had also indicted Pinochet. At the time of his death, he faced more than 300 criminal charges.

MG: I could have stolen those documents, but they were mine. If I took them, they’d lose their legal value. This “legality” is after us, but still we follow it.

MG: After the arrest, his apartment was raided and more than 500 confidential DINA documents removed. More than anything else, that document was an instrument. I have faith that another judge, journalist, or lawyer would have done what I did later.

As a long-time resident of Santiago, Judge Roa. He was chief of the Public Relations Department of the City of Santiago. I was then editor-in-chief of the newspaper La Nación. He received me saying, “What do you want them to stay alive?”

I worked for a democratically elected government but still had that job. I spoke to his boss, who said, “Don’t publish, you’ll get killed.” I told him, “You have to fire him.”

MG: I have gone under precarious circumstances to uncover the truth about his death machine, but she was asked to me deliver the documents. I was in Rio de Janeiro then and had contacts with the newspaper O Diario, I did. It paid for that edition.”

I said, “If you will declare this to the Rettig Commission,” I won’t publish it, but you must tell them everything. If you do that, I won’t publish. What we have found is that you established, for his death, bring full time breathing. He was afraid he’d have a heart attack. He was very fat and suffering profusely. So I told him, “You can’t do it today. I will come pick you up on Monday at 11:00, and nobody will know. I assure you that privacy.” Luckily, we are compassionate. We are different from them, and we have faith in life, and I think that somehow things that are hidden below ground appear. I feel like I was just an instrument. I have faith that another judge, journalist, or lawyer would have done what I did later.

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MG: Between Sorrow and Hope

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Some of those prisoners were dynamited, others thrown in the sea. I found names of the disappeared prisoners’ they’d killed in that way. There were also three names that didn’t appear on any list, and they became an obsession for me. It has been more than six months until one day, while I was reading the testimony of a survivor, I found something that said, “...and González arrived together with the Andrónico Antequera brothers.” And for the first time [the name of] Samuel González appeared. He had not been on the other lists [of disappeared prisoners].

It’s one of the most emotional stories for me because it’s only because I’m obsessive that my search helped discover that child — he was a very young man without a father or mother, an orphan. His sister was a cloistered nun, and we found that nun, who came out of her cloister only once — to file a case for her brother in the courts. And that’s interesting: today’s army didn’t accept him having a tomb inside the Military Academy.

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Thirty-three years ago, those who were scared to death to their bones were those who opposed him, and he was the Almighty who declared, from some hidden spot in the headquarters of the coup d’état, “Se mata la persona pero…”

Did you know that there wasn’t a single day during the dictatorship when there wasn’t a complaint that included the name of a torturer, the address of a secret detention center? All that is the history of Chile, and it’s now in the courts. It’s our work, our achievement. I feel proud in front of my daughters. A lot of bad things happened, but we’ve lost something beautiful to our children and grandchildren.

I could have stolen those documents, but they were mine. If I took them, they’d lose their legal value. This “legality” is after us, but still we follow it.
EF: I was surprised by the vehemence of both the hate and the love towards Pinochet, even though those people shouting his praises in the streets knew what he had done. How do you explain that?

MG: It’s true, there was love, there was vehemence, because I think what happened on the day he died was an explosion in which the masks came off. Countries have very few opportunities to experience those moments.

The pinochetistas, who have for many years hidden their love for Pinochet and their hate towards all those who think differently, are unable to control it. Their real personality comes out from deep inside them.

EF: What’s in the soul of a human being in society that allows these things to happen?

MG: It’s happened since the Roman circus, and probably before that, when an emperor gave a thumbs-down sign and an entire people screamed for blood, and those Christians or slaves died in the most brutal way in front of the crowd. That story repeats itself time and again. Today, it’s worse because there’s anestheisa. We see via a TV screen where journalists look for blood to show the audience, and the more blood, the greater success. Those 60,000 fervent, hot-headed pinochetistas, had so much hatred in their eyes and gestures. If you’d given each of them a machine gun, I don’t know what they would have done or how many people they would have murdered.

There’s a death machine, which is there, latent. I think this country is like a clock, which marks a pulse each minute, tick-tock, tick-tock, it’s the pulse of the country, the sound of the streets. The streets talk, they speak of the rage, the sadness, the passion, the pain of the citizens.

We have to look into their eyes and decipher those words full of hatred because when you don’t listen to them, they reach more people. They conquer more spaces. Their hatred invades everything. It’s very dangerous. We have to stop it.

That’s the task of journalism, to alert us when there’s hatred, to alert us when hate expands through the streets, to alert us when madmen acquire positions of power...

Sunday evening something very powerful happened to me, a whirlpool of images as I drove towards Santiago after learning of Pinochet’s death. I had to keep moving, working, writing articles for Clarín newspaper that afternoon. I had a whirlpool of images — it was very powerful — images I thought were no longer registered in my memory, but they were very clear images, even odors, of many tough episodes. And suddenly, at one point during the evening, I got a terrible chill because I realized — and to this day I am terrified to say this — that I have two children because of Pinochet, because I could have had more, but I lost them. I have the loves I have had, the lost loves, and those I had, the pain I’ve gone through, the hours without love, the discipline, the crankiness, the desire to cry that I sometimes feel, the happiness I feel — so many things of mine have depended on what that madman has done. Fue muy fuerte… It was very strong…

Elizabeth Farnsworth is a filmmaker, foreign correspondent, and former chief correspondent of the PBS NewsHour. Her 2008 documentary, “The Judge and the General,” co-directed with Patricio Lanfranco, aired on television around the world and won the DuPont Columbia Award, among other honors.

María José Calderón is a Chilean documentary producer and editor based in Oakland, California. She associate produced “The Judge and the General” and has produced and edited documentaries for PBS, Latino Public Broadcasting, Univision, and other networks.

Mónica González Mujica is a Chilean writer and journalist, winner of the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize. The interviews were conducted in 2004 and 2006 during shoots for “The Judge and the General,” which first aired on P.O.V.(PBS) in 2008.