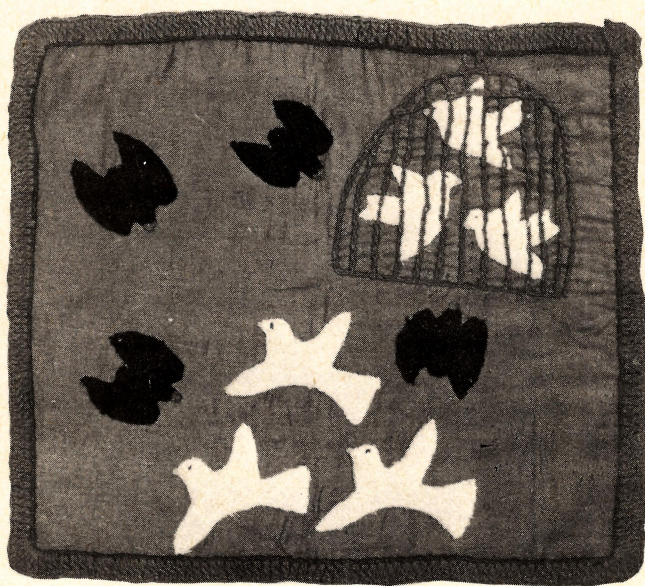


"We want
people
to know
the truth."



patchwork
pictures
from Chile



40



1



19

ON JUNE 14 th 1977 , 28 Chileans — 26 women and 2 men — entered the offices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America in the capital city of Santiago. They were relatives of some of the “disappeared” political prisoners in Chile; they declared a hunger strike and they refused to leave until they were told the fate of these 2000 people arrested by the military junta and then listed merely as “missing”.

Because of international scrutiny and domestic resistance, the Chilean junta prefers not to openly arrest people any longer and put them in recognized prisons and camps, but to seize and torture them secretly, without naming them, without charging them. Any attempt by their families to try to trace them is met with harrassment, especially by the secret police.

The demonstrators sent an impassioned message to Kurt Waldheim, Secretary General of the United Nations, and he responded by invoking extraterritorial privilege for the mission in Santiago (ie., that legally it was not part of Chilean territory), so the strikers could not be molested by the Chilean security forces. International response to the occupation was so great that Pinochet (the leader of the junta) was forced to agree, at least ostensibly, with two of the strikers demands — to look into the cases of their disappeared relatives, and not to take reprisals for the demonstration.

Up to now, neither of these promises has been kept. There has been no indication from the Chilean government that the cases have been investigated, and some of the strikers have been interrogated and had their houses ransacked. Nevertheless the strike has shown the courage of these people, who with no powers or security have formed a group to challenge the military regime.

Many of the pictures in this exhibition — patchworks sewn of scraps of clothing fabric and wool — were made by the families of ‘disappeared’ prisoners. For example, No 9 was made by the mother of one of the people shown in it, who were arrested together. The four vertical strokes at the top right stand for *Cuatro Alamos* (*alamo* = poplar tree), the isolation wing of *Tres Alamos*, one of the junta’s prison camps.* The dark square to the left stands forsome unknown place, the anguish of knowing nothing. “Sergio Reyes and Modesto Espinosa — where are they?”

Several hundred of patchwork pictures like this one have been made in Chile in the last two years, despite the atmosphere of terror. It is a popular art of resistance invented by the people themselves because of an overpowering need to express the bitter experiences they are going through and to find a channel of communication to the world outside. Some of the first of these patchworks were made in the prisons, but now they are nearly all made by women (both by the families of political prisoners and by the families of the unemployed) living in the shanty-towns, the poorest areas around Santiago.

They are not professional artists or artisans, and in general they have worked up and adapted a popular form of embroidery traditionally used to decorate bags and baskets. But their message can be understood anywhere in the world.

These rag pictures come out of poverty. They depict the brutalities and suffering the ordinary people have had

* In December 1976 the junta announced the closure of Tres Alamos prison camp, and the release of the prisoners held there. As a result of pressure both inside and outside the country, and after so many have been killed or exiled, the junta are removing some of the more obvious signs of repression. But it would be wrong to assume from this that the character of the regime or the interests it serves have changed in any way. Political prisoners are taken to secret places of detention rather than known ones. The patchworks also refer to less visible kinds of oppression, for example economic measures like the all-out drive to divert food production to export, which is causing literally starvation among the people.

to endure from reactionary rulers. They show them in detail. But in doing so they take none of the inhumanity, rigidity and coldness of their oppressors. They can express serious sorrow and at the same time be full of imagination and spirit. In the patchworks this comes out in the brilliant colours, and also in the witty and poetic way the scraps of patterned, mass-produced fabric have been used. Not only the subject, but the whole way they are made is like a message saying that the people will not be crushed and reduced to silence.

How did this movement begin?

The appearance of these patchwork pictures cannot really be separated from a very broad wave of cultural activity in Chile over more than ten years. It began before Allende came to power and continues today despite the intense efforts of the present government to crush it. It has always had a popular character. It has been linked with a movement of masses of people against the conditions, physical and mental, of "underdevelopment". Many art forms sprang up in Chile during the Popular Unity period, although they had little time to develop: the New Song movement, street and field theatre, mural painting, publishing of popular educational books and magazines which reached enormous readerships for a Third World country, new style comics, the revitalization of crafts which were languishing, and so on.

Among these crafts was one of making pictures from different coloured wools, which was specially admired and encouraged by the poet Pablo Neruda and by the folk-singer and painter Violeta Parra. This peasant art is the nearest antecedent to the present-day patchworks. But there is no direct connection. The patchworks are something new. Their makers have no formal tradition to draw on and express themselves in a direct and child-like way.

The strength of the cultural movement is clear from the way under the extreme persecution of the right-wing junta, it has adapted itself and survived in new forms. People in this country will have noticed how Chileans in exile have got together to form new music and theatre groups. Poems, plays, pieces of wood and metal carving have found their way here even from inside Chilean prisons.

The first patchworks after the coup were made to denounce the junta and expose their crimes. It is hard to be sure exactly how it began but probably in a small way among women who saw first the possibility of using an apparently innocuous form like the patchwork — so homely and "innocent" — as a means of protest. The movement quickly spread wider and wider. Patchwork-making became one of the forms of work organized in the shanty-towns to combat the massive unemployment produced by the junta's economic policies.

The workshops are organised by the people themselves, often with assistance from the Churches, which in Chile have become increasingly opposed to the military government. Patchwork-making like laundering and sewing, produces a minimal income for women to buy some sort of food, and medicines, for their children. At first they were sold inside Chile, now abroad as well at solidarity meetings and events.

Because people's survival depends on them, these workshops are carefully organized. Production has to be rationalised. They usually consist of not more than 20 women. A treasurer distributes the money obtained from sales. A certain amount is put into a fund to be used for buying materials and for emergencies. The number of patchworks produced has to be controlled. Usually one person makes one a week. At a weekly meeting the new patchworks are looked at and discussed by six women in the group and generally judged against the following criteria

- that they should be well-finished
- that the forms should be well-composed
- that the subject should be truthful, and really "say something"

In fact in the details of these pictures — sometimes disguised and "coded" because of censorship — is contained a whole chronicle of the lives of Chilean workers today,

ARPILLERAS

The patchworks

"All these things we have lived through"

1. Political prisoners at the bars of the cells in the bleak architecture of the prison. Their families in the shanty towns have to go on with normal life. But the world is split in two.
2. The day of the coup, 11th September 1973. Hypertension and confusion. The people are defenceless. A woman runs from her house in terror.
3. The National Stadium in Santiago immediately after the coup a symbol of brutality and repression now known all over the world. "Hands up!" "We are hungry" — but the food is given to the police dogs.
4. Searching for the disappeared prisoners. The endless walking, questioning, obstructions, harassment. The relatives go from one place to another and the answer is always "No". SENDE (National Secretariat for Detainees); Tres Alamos Prison camp in Santiago (always denoted in the patchworks by three poplar trees); asking friends if they have seen the missing person. The artist shows the loneliness of this quest and writes: "We lack solidarity".
5. Searching for the disappeared prisoners. Some of the organizations which have given help and how they are linked with the people: International Red Cross, and the Committee for Peace which was set up by the churches in Chile to help political prisoners but was banned in 1976.
6. Relatives of the political prisoners arrive at the prison gates carrying parcels. Some prisoners can receive visitors, but others are held in solitary confinement — "How sad I feel!"
7. Everything about this patchwork expresses the brutal methods of the DINA (Secret Police). In August last year the junta announced the dissolution of the DINA and its replacement by an organisation called Central Nacional de Informaciones (National Information Centre) Despite the innocuous name, nothing has changed. The prisoner being kicked with other torturers looking on, will not be taken to Tres Alamos but to some unknown destination.
8. "When I arrive at the prison and see one of us outside I start trembling all over, as I know something must have happened. Only a robot could go on functioning normally after all that has happened."
(mother of a prisoner in Rancagua camp)
9. This patchwork was made by the mother of one of the people shown in it, who were arrested together. The four vertical strokes at the top right stand for *Cuatro Alamos*, the isolation wing of Tres Alamos prison camp. The dark square to the left stands for some unknown place, the anguish of knowing nothing. "Sergio Reyes and Modesto Espinosa — where are they?"
10. Made by the family of a disappeared prisoner. He may be in 'Cuatro Alamos and has been missing for two years.
11. Prisoners in Cuatro Alamos. Some are released but they are crying because there are others still in prison. The sky is half sunny and half rainy.
12. "This picture refers to the political prisoners, and that they are under the lash." (note sewn on the back)

"Redimir al Cautivo — set the prisoner free!"

13. *Redimir al cautivo* — set the prisoner free! A guitar being made in the prison workshop. One of the main problems of political prisoners in Chile is that they have been forced to leave their families at home, very often with no income at all. To help solve this problem and to raise their morale, in nearly all the camps and prisons, the prisoners have organized themselves into co-operatives and set up workshops. They produce leather goods, weaving, embroidery, metal work and carvings which are sold through the churches.
14. Familia Allende is included among the family graves. Chileans would recognise the name of Perez to refer to Dagoberto Perez, a member of the MIR (Revolutionary Left Movement), killed by the military when he stayed to fight, covering the escape of his friends. They also killed his brother and sister in reprisal in another place on the same day.
15. The four black birds are the four members of the ruling junta.
16. Tres Alamos Prison Camp. The prisoners caged, the guards surround them. The guards are defeated, the prisoners burst out towards the sun. "Blessed are those that weep". "In spite of all this (the physical and mental tortures), however, political prisoners in Chile have shown great strength and solidarity. Food and other goods are shared and the prisoners have not lost their sense of purpose and awareness about the meaning of the struggle that is being fought around them."

(*Chile Under the Military Regime*. Chile Committee for Human Rights, 1975)

"What we show always has to do with people"

EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE POBLACIONES, THE SHANTY TOWNS SURROUNDING SANTIAGO.

17. People are queuing for water from the single tap. An unemployed man is playing with a dog. A woman collapses from hunger or from heat. Another on the left is carrying a sick child all wrapped up.
18. A *comedor popular* — popular kitchen. In all the shanty towns of Chile's cities and in many rural areas, the people have faced the problem of starvation by setting up public canteens for undernourished children. Here food is given to about 40,000 children who would otherwise have nothing to eat at all. The food is supplied as far as possible locally but often the churches have to give help too. These canteens are not only saving children from deformity through undernourishment but they also provide a focus round which their parents can meet and talk without fear.
19. Popular kitchen
20. Popular kitchen
21. Top left: the workers are digging a trench. They are drenched in the sun's rays which represent the period of Popular Unity. Then the coup comes and, immediately below, they are sacked from their jobs, carrying the compulsory blue cards which state the reasons for the sacking, probably political. Bottom left (dark background): they are forced to work in the Minimum Employment Programme. Before the coup (top right) things were improving for the workers and they eat at home with their families. But (bottom right) now they have to eat in the *Comedores* which share out what little food there is.
22. The people of the shanty town can't afford to buy the goods in the shop. *No se fia* — No credit. Before the military coup small shops like this extended weekly credit. Each person had a note-book in which their purchases were written down and the account was settled at the end of the week, after payday.
23. The life of the children in Chile today. The road seems to split their life in two. Below they play in the water from a fire hydrant, one is climbing a tree. Above, they struggle to survive by selling sweets to the occupants of buses and cars along the Avenida Matta, one of Santiago's busiest streets.
24. *Lavanderias* — elementary laundries in the shanty towns are a common subject for the patchworks. Unemployment and the reduction in purchasing power of the working class is obliging women to find additional sources of income such as taking in washing. This means collecting laundry from middle-class districts and returning it afterwards.
25. "No Vacancies" About 13% of the labour force in Chile are unemployed. In some of the shanty-towns of Santiago two-thirds of the men have lost their jobs.
26. The Minimum Employment Programme (P.E.M.) is the government's response to massive unemployment caused by cuts to bring inflation down. The scheme creates a sub-proletariat of people earning less than the legal minimum wage. They have no right to job security or protection of the labour legislation. Work under the P.E.M. for the most part involves needlessly sweeping the streets, digging ditches, breaking stones, tending the parks of Santiago. The Municipalities have the responsibility for providing work under the scheme but there are instances of unscrupulous employers dismissing their regular employees and taking them on again under the P.E.M. An estimated 90,000 people, all of whom must be the wage-earner in the family, are "employed" in the P.E.M. They receive 24 pesos a day — enough to buy three loaves of bread.
27. Weaving workshop. These kinds of workshops for unemployed workers and small agricultural projects in the countryside, have been set up by the people themselves, often with advice and assistance from church bodies like the Vicariate of Solidarity.
28. Another sign of increasing poverty — the pawn-broker. In Chile it is a state-owned institution, which in Allende's time was little used. Below, people start queuing outside with their possessions in the dark at 5.30a.m. The shop is open from 8—1 and accepts nothing second-hand (a new rule). Above: inside, the shop will only accept 100 cards and people are waiting for their names to be called.
29. "Fire!"
There has been a general run down in public services — fire brigade, ambulance etc — as a result of the junta's determination to "cut public spending". This is recorded in many patchworks showing fires and street accidents.
30. Considering the junta's policy towards health, this beautiful patchwork could be intended to keep alive the memory of the progress made during Popular Unity.
"The Chilean National health Service (SNS) is being sold off. The aim is that by 1976 all out patient clinics will have passed into private hands and presumably the hospitals as well if the state will no longer take responsibility for them.
This handing over of the SNS, which was set up with so much dedication and sacrifice on the part of the Chilean health workers and of the people themselves, who came as voluntary workers in all the outlying urban and rural clinics, is a huge step backwards in the development of public health in Chile.
Not only is the cost of medical attention prohibitive but it is in fact unavailable to large sectors of the population, at any price. The large scale persecution of doctors and health workers since

the coup (we know of 19 doctors killed and hundreds imprisoned, forced to flee or sacked for political reasons), as well as the mass sackings in the health service, have led to a complete lack of health workers with professional knowledge in many areas."

(Chile Committee for Human Rights, Report No. 3, Sept 1975)

31. Bureaucracy.
Receptionist — waiting room — dentist.
Outside, under a tree, a man reads a newspaper, indifferent to the whole process.
32. Eviction.
33. In the shanty town of *Barrios de Chabolas*.
Hunger — despair — suicide — drink.
34. The danger of shanty town people fighting against each other rather than the real enemy. "Hunger has made us selfish".
35. Everyday life.
"These old women spend all the time fighting. What can I sell?"
"Gossips and trouble-makers"
"Ai, love, the morning's gone and I haven't got anything for lunch"
"Scrapping dogs"
"Every day the same thing "
36. Food which the people cannot afford to buy. Shopping bags are empty.
37. The worlds of the rich and the poor
38. With the high price of meat, a poor person can only afford "½ kilo of bones". Another searches a dustbin. "Why are the bad people happy?"
39. Solidarity among the people of the shanty towns. Top, left to right: "What happened?" — "An assault" — "It's serious" — "Call an ambulance". A woman giving another food: "Thank you neighbour" — "Mama, give me some" — "Let's go to the neighbour and give her some bread and food".
Below: a sick person. "What can we do," — "Mama I'm hungry" — "Mamita, don't cry". "Poor neighbour" — "How she's suffering"
"Here you are neighbour, I'll help you."

"Everything, humour as well, can become a weapon in our struggle" SATIRE AND SYBOLISM

40. This apparently light-hearted circus picture is actually a detailed satire on the junta's economic policies. Bottom left: the four clowns of the ruling junta show off the vaunted *despegue economico* (economic take-off as advocated by the US reactionary economist Milton Friedman) which in fact was a dismal failure. Bottom right: the 'illusory magic' of the promise to provide food for the people (the junta's Economics Ministry is popularly known as the Ministry of Illusions). To left: the DINA (Secret Police) trying to put the Chilean workers under the lash. And top right: the woman at home in the kitchen, carrying her shopping basket, is walking the tightrope of survival.

Why are the junta shown as clowns?

"The measures they have taken to improve the (economic) situation in general include the sudden freezing of payments from one of the largest savings banks in the country, a campaign to buy not only dollars but jewellery from private citizens, and the selling of everything they can lay hands on to private enterprise. Even the public cemetery in Santiago is going to be sold to a private firm "to reduce public spending". They are exporting 5,000 sheep from Megallanes, in the South of Chile, to Ecuador and have forbidden anyone to eat fresh mutton in that zone until 30th November."

(Chile Committee for Human Rights, Report No. 3, September 1975)



41. The monster guards the areas of the rich people in the distance; it lies in wait near the fence which encloses the area of the poor.
42. The US dollar lording it over the workers and production of Chile. Chile's main products appear in the small circles around the centre (eg copper, shoes, textiles, foodstuffs etc). On the edge are figures of workers; and of a factory, construction site, farm and mine disrupted and closed by the junta's economic policies. The four members of the junta appear again as sinister bats.
43. Heaven and Hell. On the gate of Heaven: "The poor and humble". In Hell, the four roped together could refer to the junta, and the figure in green on the lorry to Leon Vilarín, the leader of the lorry-owners union, whose CIA – financed strike did so much to sabotage the government of Allende.
44. Jeremiah, chapter 12, verse 11:
"..... the whole land is made desolate, because no man layeth it to heart."
45. "..... In a far away land everyone was living happily. There was plenty of food and the children danced, until one day a great black bird appeared which blotted out the sun. The happiness disappeared, the children no longer danced, and nobody had enough to eat. Most of the people were lamenting and weeping, until a man appeared who asked: 'How long are we going to go on weeping? What are we doing to get rid of the big black bird? Nothing! We must join together, because only if we are united can we get rid of it.' And thus it was that doing as this man urged, everyone joined together and drove out the big black bird."
(Translated from a story sewn on the back of this patchwork)
46. The land that God forsook? The black birds devour the animals which were living peaceably in their land.

"Nunca te entregues – never give in"

RESISTANCE AND HOPE

47. Hommage to Violeta Parra. Violeta Parra, singer, poet and artist, was a great inspirer of the Chilean mass movement and helped to give it its identity. "She travelled through small and forgotten villages of the interior of Chile, with a tape recorder of "wire" (an old form of recording with a coil of platinum wire for a tape), talking to old men and women and collecting songs, poems, melodies, 'sayings', riddles, word games, dances, folk tales, mythological legends." –

Miguel Cabezas

48. "Todos Volveremos" – We will all return.
A patchwork about exile. The Chileans who go abroad are linked with those who stay behind.
Political prisoners have been set free on the condition that they leave the country immediately. Many of these have to escape for their own safety and that of their families. But the junta is using the willingness of foreign countries to accept Chilean refugees to get rid of people it thinks undesirable.
'What is important is that these prisoners, most of whom have not been charged with any crime, should not be forced to leave the country against their will. It must be recognised that in spite of the fact that ex-prisoners, whether tried or not, have little hope of finding employment or a personal future in Chile, many of those who have suffered imprisonment are determined to stay in their country as long as they can.
Those who have remained in Chile are very anxious lest their compatriots abroad forget about their country and settle down to an easier life elsewhere."

(Chile Under the Military Regime and Report No. 3, Chile Committee for Human Rights, 1975)

49. 'Where is the star today?'
The star is the star of hope, the sign of a new society. Workers have to contend with closed mines, and farms, and the eye of the DINA.
50. The dark present and the future the artist dreams of: children playing and in school; factories smoking; a full basket of food; peasants digging and planting trees. "The day will come when we will see the resurrection of our saviour". The religious phraseology has a double meaning: *salvador*, saviour, is also the christian name of Allende.
51. "Man walks in search of his freedom".
52. "Never give in or stray from the real road".

their problems, all the things that affect them most. You see the day of the Coup, the troops running wild in the streets; you see the prisons, especially from the point of view of women visiting their men, or trying to find out where they've been taken. You see all the problems of the shanty-towns: the *comedores* (collective kitchens organized to feed the children); a woman going from house to house asking neighbours to look after her child while she searches for work; children selling sweets along the main roads in order to survive; searching the dustbins at night for scraps of food; the cemetery crowded with family names.

Sometimes the artist tries to synthesise or to sum up the situation, and then two definite tendencies appear. One is the religious explanation.

Suffering is shown as a modern Way of the Cross; or, for example, a flock of sheep is shown attacked by an eagle. This is the style of lamentation. The other is the analysis of society and of class, the militant style. An example of this kind is the diagram-patchwork showing the dollar hovering over the Chilean economy (No. 42). On the whole there are few pictures which do not contain, in some segment, in some detail, an element of hope.

I mentioned before the "childlike" style of these pictures. The development of modern art has made people in Western countries receptive to the appeal of naivety in art. We have followed painters like Picasso and Klee as they adopted in their own work the spontaneous styles of untrained people, or of artists outside European traditions. This in turn has stimulated a market in which naive art has become a commodity, a fixed category which cannot be allowed to change. To look at the Chilean pictures from that point of view would be patronising and wrong. Their technique is what it is because of circumstances. To get to grips with reality, to go into it deeper, they have every reason to develop their expression.

And this can be felt in many patchworks. The artists are searching for a visual means to express links between events in life, to clarify their own comprehension of society, and therefore to help others and to aid in an effective resistance. Also, naivety has certain advantages. Already certain details which might appear merely charming and naive (one example is the 'farmyard' scene in the patchwork of the circus, No. 40) are deliberate disguises for references to real people and places in Chile which cannot be openly shown.

We tend to idolise a conception of 'free expression' in art, perhaps without realising what a great part necessity has played in the evolution of cultural expression in history. Many distinctive styles in all art forms have evolved through the ingenuity of people in evading prejudices, taboos and censorship. One of the characteristics of popular art is this resourcefulness, making use of whatever is to hand (as in the case of these patchworks), without the inhibition which can come from believing in the 'propriety' of particular materials.





As well as this, the pictures contain many elements which are not dependent on a "primitive" mode of expression, indications of a popular, democratic art and attitude to life which can be found in any nation and can be expressed in any number of ways.

Even in the most elementary composition there are still details which are given great exactness: for example, how manual work is done; "machines" which make life easier (e.g., the gas-burners under the cauldrons of soup in the *comedores*); the playfulness of children; and always as a background, in any number of colours, the Andes, the magnificent mountains which surround the city of Santiago and stretch like a backbone through the whole of Chile.

The mountains are a continuous reference point above the events in each picture. It is easy to understand their meaning: We will one day become free in our own land. The miserable material conditions which cramp our lives will one day be over and our lives will have the scale of our mountains. This is an expression of feeling that no 'censorship' can succeed in hiding.

Similarly with the artistic aspects. It could be called a matter of dignity, of one's conception of oneself as a human being, which leads the people making these patchworks, however bitter the subject, to use all the art they know, to bring out the hidden qualities and beauty in the thrown-away scraps of material:

"Apart from all this, it's a great joy that people consider that we are making art, that we are artists in this. For us, as housewives, we have never been, or dreamt of being artists or working in that sort of thing. In this there's some compensation for all that's happened. It gives us more strength to go on, to go on struggling to live. God willing, we'll be able to make them better every day."

The shanty-town itself has a double character. The poverty of the houses is not glossed over, the single crude lavatory for the whole settlement is shown, even that it's full of flies. But other details are included with pride: a table and chairs inside each house, flowers, the electric street-lamps and their cables. And there are always people. The way the shanty-town is depicted carries the message that the people must advance step by step from the real situation they are in, and that their advance must be a common one that all benefit from.

There is no rhetoric in these pictures, and very rarely is an expression isolated and carried to extremes. All the undertones and incidentals in the patchworks give an impression of tremendous reserves of strength, of a kind of balance and resilience in the people, in the face of the worst the authorities can do ■



Although this exhibition had to be made without any direct contact with the artists themselves, we nevertheless thank them first of all.

We are very grateful to those individuals and organizations who lent patchworks for the exhibition, among them Roberto Matta, Cimade (Paris), Oxfam, Chile Committee for Human Rights, London.

We would like to thank all the Chileans, in exile in several countries, who generously gave information and help in the interpretation and meaning of these pictures. Any mistakes or omissions, however, we must take responsibility for.

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