Anastasia Yip

History 199

Independent Studies

How Chilean Exiles Cope with Relocation: A Case Study on La Peña

The Chilean Coup in 1973 marked a sharp turn in Chilean history and lives when the coup overthrew a democratically elected government—Salvador Allende—and turned into a military dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet. The blatant abuse of dissidents created the need for Chileans to leave voluntarily, not to mention the fact that Pinochet exiled many Chileans to uphold his power. For instance, “[i]n the first six months following the coup, there were as many as 80,000 political prisoners… torture of political suspects, imprisonment, exile and even murder were vital elements of political control centralised in the DINA (National Intelligence Department), later renamed the CNI (National Information Centre)” (Angell and Carstairs 149). In response, the NACLA Chile Project “organized some 5,000 people to send telegrams to various embassies to ask their governments to grant political asylum to Chilean refugees” (Power 52). While many focus on the political development within Chile after the coup, it is important to examine its aftermath on Chileans who were exiled and sought refuge in other countries. To escape the new government’s abuse, many Chilean exiles fled to the United States and built new lives. Even though they relocated, especially to the state of California because of its proximity, most of them were still deeply concerned about events in Chile because of their political attachments.

The need for Chilean dissidents to leave the country attracted global attention and spawned solidarity movements, but also generated contention in the international community on
admitting Chilean refugees, especially in the US. Many Americans joined various movements that pressured the Congress to let Chilean political refugees in the country. However, a Newsweek poll showed that a majority of Democrats Republicans and Independents believed the refugees were fleeing economic rather than political hardships and saw this influx as detrimental to the US (Ghoshal and Crowley 327-328). With these discriminations in mind, it is easy to imagine the difficulties these exiles met when integrating into their host society under a highly pressurized situation. Because “the issues of Chilean politics were fairly marginal, or to remain in a kind of ghetto where the political issues remained centered on the events of 1973” (Power 156), exiles faced the challenge of communicating Chile’s situation to their American counterparts. The process of creating a new community, which had extended political activism beyond its Chilean roots, was reflected in the agenda and special programming of La Peña Cultural Center’s 40 years in Berkeley.

La Peña Cultural Center was founded in 1975 by a multi-racial group of Latin Americas and North Americans. The group sought La Peña as an imagined country for Chilean exiles who “brought to the U.S. their memories and the cultural experiences of having created gathering places for communal art” (La Peña Cultural Center). Its inclusion of political events and performances demonstrated how refugees promoted solidarity with their homeland in their new homes. Since its establishment, La Peña has organized monthly special programs that aim to inform the community about Latin American politics. In June 1986, the center hosted a benefit show for political prisoners in Chile called Update on Chile, which included a presentation from a seven-woman delegation sponsored by the National Lawyers and two Chilean-produced video documentaries, Andrés de la Victoria and Somos Mas (This Month at La Peña, Jun 1986). The
delegates, who presented their experience, visited human rights & women’s groups for International Women’s Day in March of the same year. This particular event addressed the two essential problems Chilean exiles encountered: the delegation’s report shed light on political activist happenings in Chile for their community in the US, while raising money for those who were still suffering in Chile under Pinochet’s violence.

On the 11th of the same month, La Peña directed its monthly event, Direct from Chile, on the Chilean childhood experience. Cristina Gonzalez—a singer, song-writer, and part of Chile’s New Song Movement—performed her music on stage, which La Peña’s staff described as an expression of “the aspirations of a generation of young Chileans who have grown up under the Pinochet dictatorship & are now raising their voices to demand a return to democracy” (June 1986). Engaging the audience with music, Gonzalez also encouraged them to emphasize with the young people’s yearn for freedom and democracy under the militaristic dictatorship. This embodied not only the center’s continuous efforts to “foster a close relationship with groups in Latin America that organize national and international cultural events” (La Peña Cultural Center), but also brought to the American community the reasons Chileans left their homeland.

In addition to music performances, La Peña used films in a similar fashion to tackle misunderstandings that appeared when Chilean exiles tried to assimilate into the American society. In June and September 1987, the center had two screenings on Chilean issues, showing The Battle of Chile (June 30) and Sweet Country (September 2) respectively. The Battle of Chile was deemed as “a testament to the deep social divisions capable of changing the course of history,” while Sweet Country was a documentary that featured “interviews with a wide spectrum of the population from Pinochet to a mother of a desaparecido” (This Month at La Peña, 1987).
The film choices here demonstrated a conscious effort in encouraging political activist actions in the US and deep concern for the Chilean political events still. Through music and film, a universal language that interested most people, La Peña helped tear down the wall between exiles and people in their host society by promoting empathy.

Some members returned to Chile and other parts of Latin America to bring back the political resistance that characterized La Peña. In addition to the seven-woman delegation mentioned above, La Peña put on a presentation with slides, discussion, and music from the a group of delegates in February 1987. The delegation included La Peña’s artist, such as Rafael Manriquez & Dave Lippman, and the presentation highlighted their response to the war in El Salvador after their visit in recently repopulated war zones in the rural area (Feb 11). In the following June, a similar event was put on, featuring slide shows and updates with members of a delegation that attended the May Day rally in San Salvador (June 1987).

La Peña’s archive of art and posters was also indicative of the spirit its founders carried on from the 1973 coup. One of them, which had been on the wall collection for over 20 years, had two short lines printed in red: “Sabemos que en esta lucha se nos puede ir la vida; pero la continuaremos HASTALA VICTORIA FINAL” (which could be translated to “we know that in this fight we can lose our lives; but we will continue fighting it UNTIL FINAL VICTORY”). The poster consisted of Fidel Castro’s image in the back, Miguel Enriquez in the front, and people in protest between the two. This showed that the Chilean exiles who founded La Peña Cultural Center did not give up their dream of democracy even though Pinochet took over the country. They continued to fight in their own way in a new country by creating a community that nurtured political activists and encouraged people to fight against an unjust system. This poster
was stored with a print of *Support the Chilean Peoples Struggle, Boycott the Junta Now* by the Wilfred Owen Brigade in 1974. The inclusion of political graphics produced by a revolutionary art collective, the Wilfred Owen Brigade (later known as the San Francisco Poster Brigade) demonstrated a revolutionary force similar to the Castro/Enriquez poster. Moreover, it was in memory of the demonstration at the Chilean Consulate in San Francisco on September 10, shortly after the founders of La Peña had arrived in the US. The Benefit for Chilean Refugee on the poster was evidently a crucial inspiration for La Peña’s programming. Many of its events were modeled after this benefit show, involving Chilean artists in fundraising and cultural programs.

These events also became a living example for the founders to transfer their knowledge to their children. Because they were exiled from Chile, they suffered overwhelming trauma that sometimes could not be spoken out verbally. This made it difficult for exiles to talk about their experience at home. Although “parents became dependent on their children, who learned the host country’s language quickly and became the link between household and outside world.” (Wright 38), many of them wanted to keep their children from their troubled past. While “many of them told the families and congregations that sponsored them about the UP government’s efforts to improve the standard of living of the poor and of the brutal torture and imprisonment that so many of them had suffered,” (Power 56) they rarely told their own families. Laura Victoria Salazar, the daughter of a Chilean exile and one of the founders of La Peña Cultural Center, Jaime Salazar, explained how the 1973 coup remained unspoken in the household: “I lived in a house of ghosts—the ghost of my uncle, the ghost of a country that I’m supposed to belong to. It’s in my instinct that these ghosts haunted me, but I also knew intuitively not to ask. Because it hurts.” (Salazar) In this case, cultural centers like La Peña served as a place to pass down the
Chilean experience to the next generation. The result was significant, as seen in the formation of the “La Peña 2nd Generation” (2nd Gen) in November 2010. The 2nd Gen started with 8 members who represented the children of the founders and people who grew up around the center.

According to Jocie Bartlett, who interned at and later became the Operations Manager of La Peña, recalled how the idea of 2nd Gen came up: “We were having dinner at two of the founders’ house. They’re the people who literally built La Pena, built tracks, put the electricity in, [and] made it what it is today. They invited all the sons and daughters of the founders there, and then me. I was the only white person there… Everybody speak Spanish, but everyone was so welcoming. The family that I felt from their parents—from working with their parents—was soon felt from the 2nd Gen. That all started because there were some serious economic challenges to La Peña. Most of the kids followed their parents’ footsteps, so they were either artists, musicians, or activists” (Bartlett). Bartlett’s account proved the importance of the center in bridging the gap between Chilean exiles and their children, and also that with outsiders who born and raised in the US.

The cultural center acted as a hub for Chilean exiles to show their children the political actions they were engaged in, and educated and nurtured a new generation of activists as they “followed their parents’ footsteps.” The 2nd Gen project indicated La Peña’s role in forming a shared experience and bond within the young generation that was raised in the shadow of their parents’ trauma and efforts to build new lives. In addition, the inclusion of Bartlett, who was originally an outsider, in the family-like community, showed how the cause, instead of blood ties alone, unified people in La Peña’s community. The 2nd Gen aimed to help La Peña stay relevant to the next generation. In the Occupy Oakland Movement, some of the 2nd Gen members brought
a tent and stayed at Frank Ogawa Plaza. They had a huge sign on the tent that showed La Peña’s name and created a physical presence in that movement (Bartlett). This tied back to the Chilean exiles’ pursuit of continuous political activism in a global scale, as their children connected the older community of activists to what was relevant at the moment. The cultural center helped the exiles carry on their mission from Chile to the US, and then to their children, who would continue bringing the community their parents built forward.

A poster, still hung on the wall of La Peña’s entry way after years of changes and renovations, had “CHILE” printed vertically on the left in red and black, as well as “.. EL PUEBLO UNIDO JAMAS SERA VENCIDO” lined on the top of a photograph taken during the coup. This not only reminded the Chilean exiles of their unfinished revolution at home, but also called for empathy from their American counterparts who passed by the hallway. Right next to it was an art piece that spawned from La Peña’s logo. This piece showed a man looking longingly to the side and a woman holding a red flag with the white text “FMLN” on. The flag in the woman’s hand and the field of corn below the man’s face replaced the guitar in La Peña’s original logo design. This showed La Peña’s degree of engagement in liberating the people in the Salvadoran Civil War. On their right was a man bleeding from a bullet wound, as we could only see from his back. On the top left, a quote from Renny Golden—the poet and social justice activist who co-founded the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America and went to El Salvador during the war years—was inscribed:

“I will see my land again when the revolution triumphs. That soil which holds forever in its dark blood womb the bones of Farabundo Marti and all the fallen ones. Every seed that swings a green shoot skyward, defies despair. We will harvest a nation from a graveyard. With every murder, they grow another revolutionary sweet and defiant as corn.”
The Chile exiles extended their political activism in a grander scale, beyond Chile, as they gained experience in fighting not only for Chileans while they were in the US. La Peña thus became a place for them to organize and support movements in other countries.
Works Cited


Bartlett, Jocie. Personal interview. 13 August 2015.


Salazar, Laura Victoria. Personal interview. 16 August 2015.


Sabemos que en esta lucha se nos puede ir la vida; pero la continuaremos HASTA LA VICTORIA FINAL

FINAL. 1975. La Peña Cultural Center, Berkeley. La Peña Archive. 22 Jun. 2015.
Chile. 1984. La Peña Cultural Center, Berkeley. La Peña Archive. 22 Jun. 2015.