

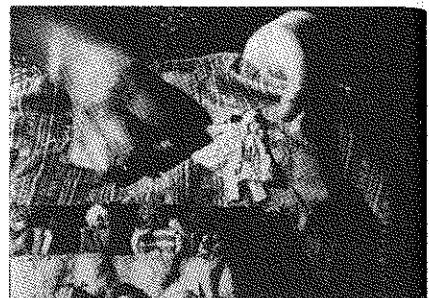
CHAPTER 4

IN THE WORKSHOPS

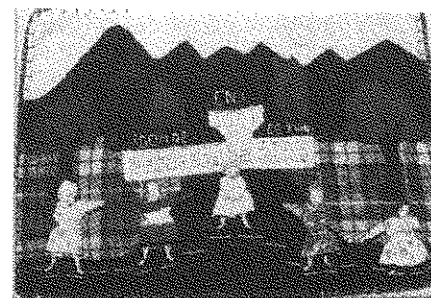
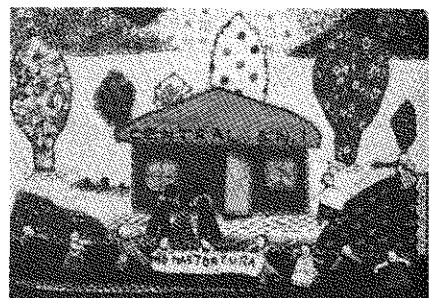
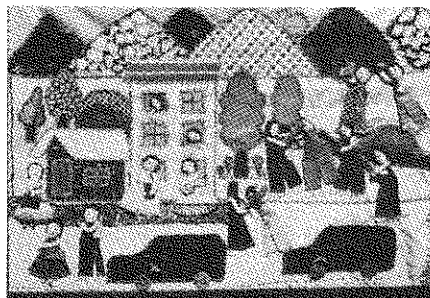
My first hand knowledge of the arpillera workshops dates from the end of December, 1979. At first I was always accompanied to the meetings by a supervisor from the Vicarate of Solidarity. Later, however, I was able to make contacts on my own with a number of the arpilleristas and gradually become friends with some of them. It was not easy to enter their world. Little by little I had to gain their respect and confidence, convince them that I was genuinely interested in their welfare, and only wanted to *listen* to them so that I could re-tell their stories, this story, to the outside world.

I never pretended to be purely objective in my dealings with the women in the workshops. I came to them committed to their cause, simply wanting to know more about them. Slowly they accepted me, took me in as part of their lives. I shared their pain, the bad moments when the work would be interrupted by sobs. In this chapter I attempt to give my very personal impressions of the time I spent in the workshops, and wherever possible, I let the women speak for themselves.

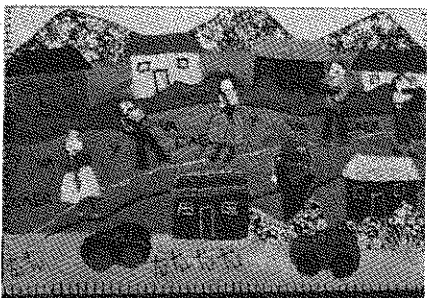
The workshops are scattered throughout different areas of the city, in churches, in or near the neighbourhoods where most of the women live. In general, the churches in these marginal neighbourhoods are themselves extremely modest. Usually the workshop would be located in whatever space was available, at the end of a long, dimly lit corridor, or in basements. The regular meetings of the members vary according to each workshop: some meet once a week,



as she tenderly
picks through the remnants of her dead,
salvages the shroud of her husband
the trousers left after the absences



she conjures up victorious armies
embroiders humble people smiling, become triumphant
brings the dead back to life



from *The Arpillerista* by Marjorie Agosin

others every fifteen days. Most of the work on the arpilleras takes place at home. The most serious practical problem the women have is lack of adequate lighting when they work. Making arpilleras is extra work done for extra income, and therefore done whenever extra time can be found, either in the evenings or in the early mornings before the regular chores begin, times when there is little or no natural light. Many of the houses have no electricity because the people have been unable to pay their bills and their service has been cut off. For the most part their houses have no heat either, and the evenings and early mornings in Santiago are quite cold. So making arpilleras is not a matter of sewing a bit for pleasure and relaxation, or even for a little extra pin money; it is done out of sheer need and is therefore done in spite of very adverse conditions.

After some time I reached a point where I could talk intimately and frankly with women in two of the workshops, but I now find it impossible for me to describe adequately what the experience was like. I am unable to recreate the intense emotion of the real, lived experience. Some moments will have to remain sealed in my soul: the shared sorrow and pain when one or more of our companions was kidnapped; stories of torture and imprisonment, the double torment suffered by women — the usual treatment dealt out to all prisoners, and the extra pain, humiliation and degradation of sexual attacks. In the pages that follow I attempt to present a synthesis of what I heard and what I learned. I will re-tell some of the most striking, most unforgettable conversations I had with women who also belong to the Association of the Detained-Disappeared. The women of the Association workshop made the greatest impression on me because of the political direction their work has taken.

I came into the workshops as a visitor, a spectator, a listener. I brought along a tape recorder on a few occasions, but for the most part I just sat beside them to listen, chat, and watch them arrange their multicoloured scraps into colourful but searing pictures. At times they seemed to me like absorbed children, playing with a ragbag of treasures, concocting their tiny dolls, carefully dressing them in diminutive outfits, arranging their hair of yarn. I see them leaning intently over their work, exchanging colours. "Look, this will

go better on yours and you are so sad today, you should give the sky more colours."¹ They took me into their circle so I might listen to them; in return I told them about my life. Later I was accepted to such a degree that I could begin to ask them specific questions. I wanted to know what they thought about, what they felt as they sat sewing.

I had only to ask and a chorus of voices started to answer me all at once. They were eager to talk. "We are here to denounce what happened to us and to put our anguish into the arpilleras so others will know. Our first motive was to use our terrible pain to tell about our blasted lives."² Irma said that her first arpillera explained all her feelings. "I showed a shattered house, a destroyed building, a broken home, as my home has been since the disappearance of my son and daughter-in-law," she said. And it is true that her arpillera, made of torn scraps, bits of left-overs, tells a story that will survive loss and oblivion.

Another woman said, "I have made my arpilleras because I have a double crime to denounce, the kidnapping of both my son and my brother. For that reason I joined the workshop in order to continue fighting and so that the truth can be known because my wounds are still open." Over and over I heard the women refer to their drastic losses as though they were physical wounds, causing physical pain.

As we got to know each other better the women talked more and more openly of their great pain, the actual physical agony they felt and about their intense need to "live again," to regain a life that is genuine, real, truthful, to discover "the truth of their lives." The word *vida*, *life*, was forever in their speech: they constantly expressed their willingness to give "life for life," the hope "to find them alive" (*con vida*, in Spanish). Above all, their yearning, their hunger for simple, ordinary, normal life came out in the arpilleras — depictions of disappeared children playing when they were little, running carefree across fields and meadows as children everywhere do. At the same time, the women of these two workshops were strongly motivated to denounce those guilty of the crimes committed against their loved ones. Anyone who has seen their

arpilleras will be touched by their powerful eloquence.

The search for loved ones goes hand in hand with the search for materials and colours to make the arpilleras. The long years of waiting and making of the arpilleras during this waiting has become a way of life for many of the women. The arpilleras are a constant dialogue with the missing; the relationship of the women with their creations has become both symbolic and symbiotic.

They say they get up in the morning and go immediately to the office of the Association, which has been given some space within the offices of the Vicarate. The arpillera workshops are scattered in churches throughout different neighbourhoods. Going to the office of the Association is a daily ritual, like their unceasing talk about their disappeared children, speaking of them as though they were present. I remember one winter evening Marisol and I were having a cup of coffee in a café in Santiago and she said to me, "I'm in a great rush these days knitting wool socks for Miguel, he can't go through the winter without wool socks." At that time Miguel had been missing for twelve years. (None of the women I met at the Association has ever found one of their relatives. And the search has gone on now for most of them for twelve years). Birthday celebrations are also regularly observed for the disappeared children. The whole neighbourhood is invited, making it a very festive occasion, just as if the missing one were present.

Inés says she has never been able to finish a single arpillera because her pain is too great. She doesn't know why, she says, but she just can't seem to finish one. The others try to encourage her, support her. They tell her, "Don't worry about it, here we are all family. We will manage it working together." And it is true that every workshop is a family, replacing in considerable measure the family that was lost when family members disappeared. Many friends and even relatives are afraid to associate with families of the disappeared, so sometimes those left behind lose everybody at once.

Hearing the women talk, especially those of the Association of the Detained-Disappeared, we noticed one theme kept recurring with particular insistence, and that is the story of the arrest of their

loved ones. The details are re-told, re-lived, repeated obsessively over and over. I never met one arpillerista who did not recount to me those moments. Each one told me how and where her child or relative was arrested, and about her continual, continuing search to find the missing one. Every search is the same. They all began at various known detention and torture centres such as Tres Alamos, Villa Grimaldi, Londres 38. As the women sit sewing they give details of their endless and fruitless treks. The responses they receive at the prisons are always similar: "Your son is not here. We were told a few days ago he had left the country," or "Your husband has left you for another woman." To this date nothing is known of the fate of the estimated 10,000 persons who have disappeared in Chile since the coup in 1973 to the present, but for the arpilleristas the search is as much a daily routine for them as working on the arpilleras.

Irma tells me that she made a vow to herself that she would not let the jailers and prison officials see her break down, that she would not let them see her cry for anything in the world. "I am not going to cry when I ask for my son," she said. "You try to keep yourself strong while you're waiting your turn only to hear them say, 'Your son is not here.' Then I still won't cry and I leave with a big knot in my throat. To remember is very painful, I've gone ten years now with this open wound. Now, certainly, there are still disappearances, people disappear from off the street. The repression we are enduring has not ended. The first arpillera I made I remember as though it were yesterday. I remember I made a young woman, myself, pregnant with my son, then a long road filled with barbed wire and a black cloud. My arpilleras are very disturbing . . . I remember another one I made with much pain, one with my son as a little boy running across the sand on the beach, and in a little pocket on the back, I put a message that said, 'When I find my son, I will take him to the sea so he can run barefoot across the sand again.' In every one of my arpilleras I have spoken of pain but also of hope."

Victoria, sitting next to Irma, is sobbing but starts to try to tell me her story, which is also about the arrest of her son. She explains that her arpillera symbolized that event: "A tree crushed my son, a

tree full of flowers. I gathered one flower and rolled it down the road." I could fill this chapter with similar stories, because the stories of the arpilleristas are composed of similar memories, a collage, as María Eugenia called them, as she added her grief to that of the others: "I feel so much pain, they took away my only son. The very moment when the men came to my house asking for him he arrived from the University, came up the stairs, and they took him away. They said, 'Don't bother to come down, Señora. We'll bring him back to you before midnight.' Up to this day, nothing. (As of this year, 1986, her son has also been missing for twelve years. Author's note). Where have I not wandered, where have I not gone looking, banging on closed doors? I was almost out of my head. I wandered through the streets totally desperate. I even spoke with Lucía (wife of Pinochet) and she told me to come back the next day. But here we stay together. In Tres Alamos when they told me my son was there, I went out running so fast I bumped into a tree and broke my leg. (He was not there. Author's note). I became exhausted but we kept together here and I kept searching for him. My companions here have helped me. The arpilleras were a beautiful kind of therapy for me. The first one I made showed the disappearance of my son; it took me a month because every doll I made had something so despairing about it. I lived alone, coming back to my house to sew and to weep caused me great suffering. To relieve my anguish I made my arpilleras."

One day I asked the women to talk about how they got started making the arpilleras. Now we find it difficult to comprehend the proportions of this movement, to take in the impact it has had. Photographs of the arpilleras appear on calendars throughout Europe; the hangings have been exhibited in many countries, though not in Chile, of course, and this has all happened during the past thirteen years of repression and anguish.

They all tell me the same thing: they needed to earn extra money. "In the beginning the Pro-Paz Committee brought us little bits of yarn and scraps and we began to make dolls but they came out very stiff, but little by little everything was put together, the details appeared, and we began to see the world, so the arpilleras

were born full of colours and full of stars."

It is enlightening to watch the women working together, interacting, to hear them tell of the events of their daily lives. Anita says, "Every morning I get up and go to the Association office to find out what's happening, what the others are doing." "Every one of us knows what is happening in her own sector," says María, from the East Zone. In this workshop I never saw any kind of hierarchical system. There are no monitors or directors who give instructions. The group chooses the themes to work on and makes all other decisions. They do offer help to each other, make suggestions about colours. They tell me, "Here in the workshop we tell jokes, we laugh, we cry and we console one another." Irma says, "There are no class differences here. We are a real family." Here I should explain that although 80 percent of the arpilleristas come from poor working-class families, with husbands either unemployed or missing, some 20 percent are from the upper-middle class who have joined the Association because of the disappearance of their children, or because they identify with the suffering of those who have lost family members.

As a kind of spin-off from the banding together of the membership in the Association, women seem to be cooperating in a new spirit. On October 30, 1985, 3000 women, representing a cross-section of all social classes, met in one of the affluent neighbourhoods of Santiago and marched silently together to the centre of the city to ask for a return to democracy. Before, only women from the shantytowns and poor neighbourhoods were participating in such marches, but now more and more women from all levels of society are joining them. Members of the Association participate as a matter of principle in virtually every such demonstration.

One day in the workshop I asked about what special feelings the women had when an arpillera was finished. They said, "a great anxiety at having to express openly all one's inner feelings, to have to sew and put together every detail, but happy to denounce what is happening." "When we finish our arpilleras our moods are clearly visible. When I am feeling sad, all my arpilleras come out in dark colours that show my loneliness."

Sometimes we talked about husbands, and it was obvious that their marriages were undergoing changes. They said, "In the beginning our husbands were against the workshops, they didn't want us to come, but now they take an interest and sometimes help us cut out the pieces for the dolls." One woman expressed what seems to be the transcendent fact of this movement of women occurring during a period of harsh oppression. She said, "The Chilean woman has to carry the whole burden, even peddling trinkets on the street up to the ninth month of pregnancy. Or think of the women at home alone with their husbands out of work, they have to figure out ways to bring up and educate their young children so they can believe in the dignity and worth of common people." Another woman said, "Women have changed so much that the military themselves made the comment that the biggest mistake they made was in leaving the family members of the disappeared alive."

In talking about how things had changed in her home, Amparo said, "The Chilean woman is playing the main role in the family today, and has also had to assume the role of provider for the family. Because of her double responsibilities changes have been made."

Through no fault of their own, men have lost their old position and status as breadwinner for the family, and traditionally men have never played a strong role in the day-to-day routine of the household. That was regarded as women's territory. Now the man feels exiled from both workplace and home. His frustration is evident as he tries various ways to escape, or at least alleviate, his painful situation. As might be expected, abuse of alcohol and suicide rates among men have risen substantially.

Once I sent a written inquiry to the women of various workshops asking them to describe the participation of husbands in workshops and related activities during the past decade. One answered, "They don't participate in anything, they are completely demoralized. They never go to the protests." Another explained, "It's much better not to send them to the protests. Why send them out so they can be sent into exile, or be arrested and killed?" Others expressed much tenderness in their replies: "When I am in a hurry

to finish an arpillera everybody in the house helps me, even my husband when I catch him in a good mood." And another adds, "They help us make the heads of the dolls, it's very easy, or they stay with the kids when we come to the workshop."

This is not the first time in Chile's history that women have surged to the forefront of events. Some of these periods have been described in more detail in Chapter II. In recent times women started to play a wider role in public affairs during Allende's time. The intention was there on the part of the government, so to speak, but was never carried very far into practice. Now under the dictatorship a leading role has fallen to women almost by default, because of many different factors. A major factor is that the Junta, with its extreme attitude of machismo, takes men seriously but not women. Men have been their main prey for arrests, torture and disappearances. The Junta does not dare appear to take women seriously, no matter what they do. If a man joins a public protest against the regime, the Junta takes it as an open challenge to its authority that must be countered with whatever force is necessary. Women understand the precarious position of their husbands and also their own privileged position, so to speak, and have learned to take astute advantage of it. They not only denounce Pinochet's regime in their arpilleras, but in the streets as well. They have participated in all manner of demonstrations against the dictatorship. More often than not it is the women who insist that the men stay at home so they will not be arrested, exiled or tortured. Here again we see women assume the role of Super Mothers — protecting husbands and children, providing income to maintain the family, marching every Thursday to the building of the Supreme Court, wearing photos of their missing ones on their chests just as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires did — and still do. In Santiago the marches continue to take place in spite of police harassment and repression.

I ask them how they find the strength to do it all. They say, "We've been hit by so many blows in life. We might as well be out in the frontlines now because many of us have nothing more to lose." Another said, "Chile is a country divided by mountains but also

divided within. The arpilleras show, try to explain, this separation.” And another, “My life consists of making arpilleras but doing many other things as well, such as going to visit political prisoners and participating in any demonstration that might be going on and just keeping faith with my people.”

The women talked about their other activities as a group, their demonstrations and political protests. They told me about various protest actions they organized in 1979 outside of one of the largest and most notorious torture centres, the one known as Londres 38, from its address in downtown Santiago. (It is now a centre dedicated to Bernardo O'Higgins (1776-1842), the liberator of the country). The arpilleristas said they covered the walls of the house with a large white cloth, sprinkled it with red paint to symbolize blood, and in red paint wrote the names of the 119 prisoners known to have been tortured there who later disappeared, meaning, of course, that they were tortured to death and their bodies disposed of in some secret place. As of today, no trace of any of their remains has been found. I ask if they were afraid while taking part in that demonstration. They said, “Afraid, no, in fact, just the opposite. That demonstration, like the arpillera, is a way of saying what can't be said in any other fashion, to tell what is really happening in our country. The fact that we meet together here in the workshop is very important because we give each other courage to go out in the street together.”

They have all taken part in hunger strikes, have chained themselves to fences in strategic locations in downtown Santiago such as the Supreme Court, the door of Pinochet's house, the old Casa de Gobierno. Many of their manifestations have disrupted traffic and the normal flow of life in the Capitol — all are aimed at calling attention to the Junta's practice of torturing and disappearing people and are intended to force out the truth of what has happened to the missing members of their families. I ask again, What gives them the strength to continue? What keeps them from faltering against such odds? What drives them to undertake all this activity? They said, “We still have hope to find our loved ones, if not alive, at least to know the truth of what happened to them, and to recover their bones if possible. but in spite of all, we feel they are still alive,

we feel their spirits everywhere.” Delfina interrupts to say, “I believe my son is dead, but he lives on in the others, in all the young people. That is what keeps me alive and active. All the rest is secondary.”

The Arpillera as Political Protest

I discuss here certain arpilleras that might be classified as chronicles detailing the crimes of the dictatorship. They can be “read” as easily as one reads a daily newspaper, so closely are they connected with daily events.

In my collection I have an arpillera that is unusual in that it bears a title on its reverse side: *Lonquén*.³ It was made by Angélica after she went on a pilgrimage to Lonquén, a village on the outskirts of Santiago where a terrible discovery was made in 1978. A mass grave was uncovered inside an old abandoned mine shaft where remains of bodies of a number of farmers who had disappeared were found. They had been thrown into the mine shaft and then partially burned. After the discovery the Catholic Church organized a pilgrimage in which Angélica took part, along with many other members of the Association and thousands more shocked and saddened citizens of Santiago. Angélica's arpillera shows the macabre mass grave of Lonquén: in the midst of high mountains are several improvised ovens where human beings are burning. In this arpillera the event, the horror, the emotion, the hideous truth is all fused, but not in a way to provoke feelings of hopelessness and despair. It is rather intended to mourn the dead but also to celebrate the discovery of some part of the truth connected with the disappearances and to arouse families and their supporters to keep searching until all the truth is uncovered.

Hernán Vidal speaks of the transcendent nature of the pilgrimage to Lonquén. He writes: “The pilgrimage to Lonquén was a ritual of the celebration of life and therefore, an affirmation of the will and communal capacity to fight for a new society with clearness of purpose.”³

María Cecelia tells me about another tragic event that was later

depicted in an arpillera. In 1979 Sebastián Acevedo immolated himself in the main plaza of the city of Concepción (latitude 37° south). His two sons had disappeared and he had never received any response from the secret police as to their whereabouts or their fate. An arpillera shows Sebastián in his last moments surrounded by a crowd of people. Torn bits of newspaper are pasted to the design to show it was a real event. The immolation of Sebastián Acevedo gave rise to another movement: the Sebastián Acevedo Movement Against Torture. Some arpilleristas also belong to this group that carries out various public non-violent acts intended to recall his death and the reasons for it. Following are some of the chants that are repeated during the demonstrations. The initials referred to, D.I.N.A. and C.N.I., are acronyms for two notorious organizations of Intelligence and the Secret Police of Pinochet, that are most responsible for the kidnappings, torture and disappearances. *La Moneda* is the White House of Chile, where the head of Government lives and has his offices (where Allende was killed and where Pinochet now lives).

INVOCATIONS FOR SEBASTIÁN ACEVEDO

1. Sebastián Acevedo, father, worker and prophet, on this anniversary of your immolation, we wish to remember you. There in Concepción, before the Cathedral, in the Plaza de Armas
TO STOP THE TORTURE, YOU ACCEPTED DEATH
Calling out "Let the C.N.I. return my sons to me . . ."
TO STOP THE TORTURE, YOU ACCEPTED DEATH.
2. Sebastián, your immolation moved all of Chile and resounded throughout the world.
BUT THE REGIME KEPT ON TORTURING.
National opinion asked that the C.N.I. be dissolved.
BUT THE REGIME KEPT ON TORTURING.
The spokesmen for the regime were ashamed, averted their eyes and lied
BUT THE REGIME KEPT ON TORTURING.
3. Sebastián, for an entire year your spirit has not been able to rest.

When we gathered in front of the clandestine prison of Borgoño
YOU WERE THERE
When we rattled the doors of the newspapers that remained silent
YOUR WERE THERE
When we pointed to those responsible: the torturers
of La Moneda
YOU WERE THERE
4. Sebastián, while Chile remains a territory of torture,
you will keep on grieving over our soil . . .
YOU WILL KEEP ON GRIEVING OVER OUR SOIL
But the day will come, Sebastián, it will come as sure as dawn,
when the night of death will sink into the abyss.
A NIGHT OF DEATH
and you will rest . . .
AND YOU WILL REST
And this Movement Against Torture that you helped create
will have completed its task . . .
WILL HAVE COMPLETED ITS TASK.

STRENGTH THROUGH SHARED LIVES

I discovered that the women of the workshops have emerged from their isolation of former years and together have learned to face the realities of life in Chile today. Their arpilleras ask for Bread, Work, and Liberty. The spirit of the women is very well illustrated by one of them who talked about the political protests. "At one time we all went with lighted candles through the centre of the city." Another added, "We told every bit of it on an arpillera, that has to be our way of denouncing. I have made the entire story of the disappearance of my son, and other mothers have done the same." "The arpillera cannot be prostituted for a thing that is not real. We don't make the arpilleras just to be making something, to show little nothings or a field of flowers. The arpillera was born to show our real lives, disappeared children, hunger, unemployment, common soup kitchens, our lack of light and water."

I wish to recall some of the conversations I had with the arpilleristas of the East Zone workshop. Their experiences have not been as intense as those of the Association workshop since not all of them suffer the tragedy of the disappearance of family members, but they do suffer the very grave problems that have to do with simple survival—hunger and the fierce police repression inside the shantytowns. One said, "I'm not afraid to make arpilleras here in the workshop, but I am afraid to work on them at home because the cops come and trash everything." Another woman, speaking of the lack of light and water said, "When there is no light, I rustle up a few wires and steal a little, that's all." (Some arpilleras show the very common practice of "stealing" light by running wires from the house to the city light pole. The service has been cut off for non-payment of bills). In this workshop, composed of women 30-50 years of age, we have a cup of tea and a good laugh when Soledad says, "Who would believe that my arpillera was going to be in a boutique on Fifth Avenue (New York) when, imagine, I took a piece of blue from my own skirt to make the sky, from this ragged, cheesy skirt." We laugh again, but that description contains the real truth of the arpilleras; they are not a superfluous accessory; they are a form of art that comes out of daily life, the dailiness of life, down to the very clothes of the maker.

I ask the women how they feel now about the arpilleras after all these years. They say that at first they felt their work was very crude but now they feel more like artists or reporters describing scenes of daily life. One woman says, "I put an enormous sun in all my arpilleras, because even though I might not have a cup of tea to my name I never lose my faith."

Sometimes the women expressed their deep emotion about the arpilleras. One said, "My old man fell sick on me with his lungs, and on top of that he had cancer and landed in the hospital. I didn't know what to do so I decided to try to alleviate my anguish and made that the theme of an arpillera. I appliquéd a long road that went up to the hills and had no end, and there was a sun looking at me and the light gave me strength. The sun I embroidered entirely out of red yarn. When time came to sell it, I just couldn't. How was I going to sell that

arpillera that had so much of myself in it? How could I think about setting a price for my own life?" Another woman added, "I have become so keenly fond of my arpilleras because they give me food but because they also help me kill my sorrows."

During my visits with the arpilleristas in the workshops and sometimes in their homes in the shantytowns, where a home is often a one-room shack for an entire family, with a cardboard roof, no light, water and naturally no bathroom, I most often found the women smiling, cheerful, with a contagious vitality. I asked them their ideas about God. I was not inquiring about a specific dogma or even about a specific religious belief. I just wanted to know what motivated them and kept them going. Many gave me basically the same answer. To quote one woman, "I see God as one who gave His life for a better world. He is present in each one of us. We have experienced the Way of the Cross because of our missing relatives, and the people who listen to our story, like you, for instance, in this moment, help us to bear this calvary." Maria's statement summed up the ordeal of the women in the workshops as well as the ordeal of Chile at the present time when she said, "God chose the humble to shame the powerful. It's for that reason we make the arpilleras so this kind of thing will never happen again."

THEMES OF THE ARPILLERAS

The arpillera is above all a form of popular art used to tell of personal experiences, but also to recount the tale of the tribe, in the way of ancient cultures. Like old sagas they tell of the trials and tribulations of the people, of heroes and villains, of courage and cowards, of struggle and survival. But instead of bards, balladeers or storytellers, an unlikely group has come forth to tell the story of Pinochet's Chile that was not supposed to be told. With left-overs and scraps, with found objects and rejects, torn pieces of newspapers, spent matches, the arpilleristas are methodically filling in what was intended to remain a blank in Chile's history. The arpilleras show the stuff of daily life for many people: hunger, sorrow, death, unemployment, repression, hope. The arpilleras are neither escapism nor political tract: they depict life in its complexity

and contrasts. A smiling face and a sad one in the same arpillera — real life, in other words. Some arpilleras have become quite sophisticated in their ability to express the sharp contrasts of life. One, for example, shows night and day — day hopeful with light and trees, night profoundly dark with all doors closed. The lack of water in poor neighbourhoods is a constant problem and is described over and over in the arpilleras. In one, children are shown playing near the school, the scene is lively and cheerful, but all the public water faucets have been Xed out with red yarn. In another a blue river runs through the centre of the arpillera but on the bank are children holding pails on which is written: "Give me water, we need water, please a little water."

Like all popular expression that departs from habitual forms and language, it is touching to see arpilleras with embroidered slogans and phrases with words misspelled. It is no wonder since some 60 percent of the women have received very little schooling.

Some arpilleras tell a connected narrative, simple stories such as one might find in a cartoon strip. A very successful one of this type has several scenes, one leading into the next, and the message is unmistakable. Strips of yarn close the door of the factory (unemployment) then we see children in a big common dining room (child feeding program) and women around a big outdoor common soup pot (food for the unemployed). The depiction of the church has become almost stylized over the years. Most often it is shown with little attached doors that open and close. Above the cupola there is always a big sun and next to the church door the common soup pot and a collection bag used to collect money on the streets to help keep all these projects going. The church always means food and hope.

During the first years of the dictatorship, 1973-1974, when the lives of so many had been shattered, designs of the arpilleras were also essentially unconnected fragments. Later after the women had become organized and had found some direction for their lives, the direction was reflected in turn in the arpilleras. The separate elements made up a whole, the world was being put back together again after a fashion.

One woman said that in one of her first arpilleras she showed her house. The door was open and inside the house she put flies, discarded papers, trash, because that's how her house was then. The arpilleras never stray far from reality. One Christmas scene shows Santa with a traditional white beard and a big sack on his back but the sack is filled with bread — there are no toys. The author of that one put down her real wish for Christmas. Another arpillera with a Christmas scene asks for "A Christmas With No Herods and No Torturers." Little by little the arpilleras have developed a language of their own, their way of saying things. One can discover a kind of semiotic shorthand of living experiences, some as simple as X's to show a building is closed or something not working. With time and practice some women have become very skilled and their work more thoughtful and sophisticated. I was impressed by one arpillera that shows a tree, a church and on the cupola of the church is written "Hunger Has Roots." This evolution of the arpillera to encompass a wider mode of expression has come about for two reasons: because the women have become more focussed as to their direction and intentions and their horizons have widened because of their activity. Their intent is to use the arpillera as an alternative way of communicating since normal channels are blocked. Such has been my observation about everything the arpilleras who are also members of the Association of the Detained-Disappeared.

The first arpilleras dealing with the theme of the *disappeared* had a simple question mark embroidered over a figure representing the missing one. Then the question really was, Where are they? When will they be back home? Because at that time people believed they would return eventually. After more than a decade, that hope has faded if not died altogether, and the arpilleras have become sharper and more concrete. One carries the slogan: "TRUTH AND JUSTICE FOR THE DETAINED-DISAPPEARED" with a photograph of the disappeared one pasted to the cloth.

Photographs have become the talismans, the symbols of mothers looking for their missing children, whether in El Salvador, Argentina, Lebanon or Chile. The image keeps the memory real and alive, keeps the child close and is a comfort. The photographs says,

"Here it is, that's what he looks like, he exists."

✓ As the women have accepted the task of telling by means of the arpilleras, their horizons have widened beyond their own personal sorrows to embrace those of other members of the group, the concerns of their neighbourhoods, and finally they are thinking of the agony of the country. The women who can read bring in newspapers and read stories of special interest to the others. One woman said, "Never in my life have I learned so much. I always regarded prostitutes as despicable and thieves as the scum of the earth, and now, well, I understand it's not their fault. I learned that here in the workshop."

✱ From the practice of reading the newspapers came ideas for political protests, manifestations such as the ones recalling Sebastián Acevedo, or the idea of taking part in the pilgrimage to Lonquén.

MA Many arpilleras, especially those made in the last few years, express a longing for a better life in the future. Many show fields full of little animals and ripe crops surrounded by darkness. They tell me it is a dream of a better world, one with enough food for everybody. Another arpillera shows little girls celebrating their First Communion, the little dolls dressed in white lace like brides, a nostalgic scene, since the First Communion is a very happy day.

There are certain images that recur over and over. I would say that 90 percent of the arpilleras I have seen have a backdrop of the Andes. Sometimes they are very dark as though the mountains were in mourning. At times the peaks are gay and covered with flowers giving a hopeful air to the scene. The sun is another element that is very often present in the arpilleras, even in grim scenes such as those showing arrests. Perhaps one might argue that the Andes and the sun are a part of the realism of the arpilleras since the mountains are visible from virtually every location of Santiago and the weather is very often sunny and bright.

The arpilleras are a result of both intention and chance. The women begin with an idea of what they want to portray, but they must use whatever materials are at hand. Within these considerable limitations they achieve astounding expressiveness. Colour is one of their main ways to set the tone of a composition as is true in any

visual art. The colour of the crocheted edging, the frame, and the large masses, such as the Andes, are chosen with as much care as possible to express the mood the women wish to convey. They tell me that grays and yellows lighten the scene and keep it from being too sombre.

* THEMES *
Themes that occur very often in the arpilleras include the neighbourhoods, the houses, inside and out, signs of those missing, either disappeared or in exile, illustrations of the pick-up work they do to earn a little money — selling trinkets on the street (almost 90 percent of the women sell trinkets from time to time), working as street sweepers, washing clothes, working as maids. They often show the health centre, the common soup pot with a fire burning underneath, the child feeding centres, the closed school, lack of water and light, eviction scenes. Pilgrimages to remember the dead, protest demonstrations, torture centres, NO WORK AVAILABLE signs. The church and dreams. We have already mentioned the almost ubiquitous presence of the Andes and the sun.

Eduardo Galeano in his book, *Las venas abiertas de Latinoamérica* (The Open Veins of Latin America) writes, "In the system of silence and fear the power to create and to invent counters the routine of obedience."⁴ This is without any doubt an important legacy of the arpilleras in Chile today, a legacy that is leading toward self-knowledge for the arpilleras and a consciousness of worth for the working class in general.

✱ The arpillera does not pretend to be a work of aesthetic coherence. The materials and methods used are, of necessity, extremely simple and modest. The stitches are uncomplicated mostly chain stitch, blanket stitch and cross stitch. What is important is that real life is depicted with imagination and ingenuity, such as using a lock of one's own hair if necessary or a piece of one's own skirt to get a desired colour.

The arpilleras have a different quality from other needle crafts of Latin America that are intended for aesthetic pleasure only. Lucy Lippard is correct when she describes the arpilleras in the following manner: "They protest the Junta's repressions and offer methods of self-determination and economic survival. These

GOOD QUOTE

women can't sit around and analyse their role; it has been handed to them on a bloodstained platter. By confronting it in a familiar medium that does not separate art and life they are producing the most cohesive political art around. The arpilleras are the only valid indigenous Chilean art now that the murals have been painted over, the poets and singers murdered and imprisoned."⁴

Lippard is referring to the fact that during the Allende regime, schoolchildren, students, workers, in fact all citizens, were encouraged to participate in a project of drawing murals in the city parks and in other designated places. Many of these drawings were mildly didactic in that they illustrated the need for literacy or better health care, but on the whole, they simply were an attempt to foster a new social awareness. After the coup all the murals were washed off the walls or painted over and nothing is left of them now. It all happened so quickly almost no record is left of them. The most famous muralists were a group of students who called themselves the Ramona Parra Brigade and did extensive murals in the streets of Santiago, all vanished now.

Almost everyone is familiar with the fact that there were widespread arrests and exiling of artists and intellectuals after the coup. The folk singer Victor Jara was among the thousands rounded up in the soccer stadium immediately after the coup. He was murdered and when his body was claimed by his widow she found his hands had been mutilated. (He had accompanied himself on the guitar). Violeta Parra was already dead by the time the coup occurred but her children, Angel and Isabel, were exiled, along with literally thousands of others, among them the most gifted of the country's writers, artists and musicians.

In discussing (Chapter III) the possible antecedents of the arpilleras we mentioned a group of women called the Bordadoras de Isla Negra (The Embroiderers of Isla Negra). There is no doubt that the work of the women of Isla Negra, a farming and fishing village on the coast of Chile about 60 km. southwest of Santiago, had a great influence on the arpilleristas of Santiago. The success enjoyed by the Bordadoras, the great interest in their work abroad, the exhibitions in leading museums, including the Louvre, and sales of

their work around the world provided a real stimulus for the arpilleristas. However, there are great differences in the work of the two groups and in the attitudes of the women toward their work. The most important difference is that the Bordadoras do not participate in any kind of public political activity. They seem to live outside current events in their protected rural retreat. Their attitude is undoubtedly due in large measure to the fact that they do indeed live in a tranquil area, in the country, sheltered from the horrendous problems and dangers that beset the shantytowns and poor neighbourhoods of Santiago on a daily basis. But there appears to be a will, a deliberate attempt to escape the convulsions occurring elsewhere in the country. During repeated visits to Isla Negra I noticed that when the names of very well-known Chileans arose in the conversation — Allende, Neruda, Pinochet — certainly the three most prominent public figures of Chile in recent years — the women never responded, they seemed not to have heard the comment. It's not that they are living in such an isolated area that they don't know who these men are. Neruda lived in Isla Negra off and on for thirty years, wrote about the embroideries and arranged the exhibit of them at the Louvre when he was Ambassador to France under Allende. Allende was known as a great admirer of their work and often presented the embroideries as gifts to foreign heads of state. We are left to conclude that their unwillingness to express any opinion that might be considered political is a form of self-protection. The women of the Santiago shantytowns, on the other hand, had no choice but to become politically active if they were to survive as whole, caring human beings. Their activism was thrust upon them by events.

In spite of differences, there are also similarities between the groups. Like the arpilleristas, the Bordadoras began their needlework to earn extra income during the winter months when the Pacific is too stormy for the men to go to sea to fish and when there is no fresh produce for the market. As time went on the different groups of Bordadoras developed autonomous, independent ways of working; their work, especially the use of colour, became more and more expressive and imaginative. Now they have reached a point

where their tapestries are internationally known and sought after. The women in CEMA CHILE workshops, described in the previous chapter, have been encouraged to produce counterfeit-bordados as well as counterfeit-arpilleras, and to try to pass them off as genuine autonomous folk art. But anyone who has studied the original works with even a little care can never be fooled by the fakes.

To give a little of the background of the Bordadoras, the work began in the 1960s, fostered by Doña Leonor Sobrino de Vera, a woman with philanthropic interests who lives part of each year in her home in Isla Negra. She wished to do something to ease the precarious economic situation of the villagers, particularly during the winter. As she herself describes the sequence of events, she was walking past a shop window in Santiago one day and saw a display of wool yarn of many varied and beautiful colours, and promptly suggested to some women in Isla Negra that they try their hand at making embroideries with wool yarn. Some were hesitant to try it, she says. Some had no skill at needlework. Nevertheless, with Doña Leonor's encouragement, they began to work anyway. At first they went out into the countryside and tried to capture the look of the landscape, the fields and trees. Later as they became more practiced and skilled, they progressed from landscapes to more varied scenes. They showed children playing games, men in their fishing boats, animals and birds, the sea, and also imaginary scenes. One might say they show life as it ought to be, as the women dream it, or remember it, not as it actually is.

The technique employed in making the embroideries is much finer and more elaborate, more time-consuming than that used for the arpilleras. The stitches are varied, the mix and shading of the colours sometimes inspired. Embroidery covers the entire surface of the backing cloth so that the finished work has the look of a woven tapestry, or a painting. The arpilleras are like a newspaper sketch; the embroideries like naive paintings, with their brilliant colours and childlike disregard for the regular rules of perspective and proportion. There are birds bigger than the houses over which they are flying, a threshing scene within a circle as though seen from above, and the other elements of the scene also seem to be airborne,

revolving around the central picture. However, the intent of the embroideries is to be true to the inner vision of the maker, and the many small details help create a true expression of a luxuriant landscape, the sea, and the life of the village.

The women of Isla Negra work mostly in the winter, sitting beside the fire, dreaming of spring and summer, remembering scenes from childhood, and thus they reproduce the houses and scenes of years ago. So a true portrait of Isla Negra comes through, but Isla Negra remembered.

The arpilleristas, on the other hand, show what happened to them yesterday, or last night, or what they saw this morning. Police sweeps. Arrests. Beatings. Hasty burials of dead prisoners at night in unmarked graves. Or they show what they see every day: soup kitchens, closed factories, women washing clothes, children playing. And there are the constants in their life: the church, the Andes, the sun, the *disappeared*.

I asked the women in Isla Negra if they had heard of the arpilleristas in Santiago or of other groups who have become known for needlework like embroiderers of Macul and Conchalí. These embroideries are also of wool and use the same technique that the women from Isla Negra use, but the work has not become as well known yet. They said yes, they had heard of these groups, but offered no further comment. They show no inclination to venture out of their protected and beautiful corner of the world, and who can honestly blame them? May they continue to live and work as always and to delight us with their idyllic and aesthetic view of a world that should be.

The lives of the Bordadoras is contained by their families, nature, the seasons of fishing and farming. I ask them how they pick the scenes to embroider and one woman replies, "I made my house with all the trees and flowers and plants. At first we didn't have much self-confidence but Doña Leonor helped us."⁶ Another said, "I felt really afraid making my first embroidery, but Doña Leonor liked it a lot."⁷ I never encountered this feeling of being afraid and anxious about how the work will come out and be received among the arpilleristas of Santiago. Perhaps this is a major difference

between a popular art made for aesthetic purposes only, that is, art meant to please, and art meant to expose and denounce, like the arpilleras.

Both groups reflect in their work the world they live in: the tranquil world of farms and sea of Isla Negra where harshness comes more from nature than from man, and the world of the arpilleristas of Santiago, under constant siege where life is precarious in all respects, a nightmare world. We can only admire the fearlessness and courage of the arpilleristas who choose to confront the evils and demons of their world, to denounce them and fight them not only in their pictures but in the streets as well.

There is one important aspect that both groups have in common — the joy and comfort they find in working together with other women. The Bordadoras spoke warmly of how much at peace they are in their familiar surroundings and the pleasure they get from the loving friendships that have developed among women of the groups. Both groups work cooperatively and on equal terms with one another, without leaders or monitors. In both cases the more experienced women help the newer members of the group. Both the arpilleras and the embroideries have become known and prized far beyond the borders of Chile — a tremendous achievement for any artisan, a transcendent victory for the housewives and mothers of Isla Negra and Santiago. By working seriously with modest means they have made an impact on Chilean society and changed their lives in the process.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 All direct quotes come from members of the Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared.
- 2 For the protection of the women they have been quoted as a group, "they", or invented first names have been used.
- 3 There is an interesting book of Máximo Pacheco called *Lonquén* (Santiago: Aconcagua, 1980) which gives the history of this event. A fictionalized version appears in Isabel Allende, *De Amor y de Sombra* (Of Love and Shadow) Barcelona: Plaza & Janes, 1984. Also see Hernán Vidal.
- 4 Eduardo Galeano, *Las venas abiertas de latinoamérica* (*The Open Veins of Latin America*), México: Siglo XXI, 1977 edition, p. 20.
- 5 Lucy R. Lippard, *Get the Message: A Decade of Art for Social Change*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984, p. 86.
- 6 Statement of Narciso Catalán, Isla Negra, July, 1983.
- 7 Statement of Alicia Pérez, Isla Negra, July, 1983.

CHAPTER 5

TESTIMONIES

The testimonies that make up this chapter are presented exactly as they were received by the author. No attempt has been made to correct small errors or to reconcile variations that may exist in different versions of the same event. The translator, working in close collaboration with the author, has made a special effort to capture the emotional feeling of the original accounts. Punctuation has been kept the same since the original writing clearly indicates the flow of a story that is being told, and has been told over and over, rather than a narrative composed especially for publication. Occasionally an explanatory word or phrase has been added for the sake of clarity. Although names and biographical details are mentioned in many of the testimonies, we have left the accounts unsigned in an attempt to protect as far as we are able the brave women who have dared to tell us their stories.

Testimony #1

... I was born in Chile, a country of mountains, three hundred years of struggle did not save us from the conquest and independence from Spain did not save us from madness.

My interest in art arose naturally from my contact with other students, in the face of family opposition I entered the school of Fine Arts in the University and there became involved in movements interested in working with community groups, in literacy work in marginal sectors of the city, finding for the first time the gratifying sensation of giving something and not only that but contributing