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## **“We are the bridge between the victims and the other human beings”**

An interview made by Izabella Klein with dr. Jose Quiroga, co-founder of the Program for Torture Victims (PTV) based in Los Angeles, USA.

**More and more refugees are arriving to Hungary and to the luckier regions of the world, many of them suffered from torture. They require different treatment than the others. A small non-profit, Cordelia deals with the psycho-social rehabilitation of torture victims in Hungarian refugee camps. As an employee of Cordelia I met dr. Jose Quiroga, the co-founder of the American non-profit, PTV. Both NGOs are members of the international umbrella organization, IRCT (International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims) in Los Angeles. Dr. Quiroga was a personal doctor of the Chilean president, Allende during the military coup and worked underground as a physician in Chile for another 3 years before he founded his own institution in the US with a psychologist colleague of his. The relationship of the two member organizations of IRCT became closer when the doctor worked in Europe with Bosnian victims after the Balkan war.**

**We talked about losing the trust in humans, aggression, statistical expression of fear and how to work against them.**

### **- What do you think the most important part of our work with refugees is?**

Understanding, that the victims of torture lost their trust in mankind in general, and they don't believe in human beings anymore. Because atrocities against them were also done by humans. I learned this when I worked with a refugee from Paraguay, a kind of leader who came to the US with a wound on his head from a bullet and here he began to develop seizures. He became part of our program and we started treating him with epilepsy seizures. In one of the visits he unexpectedly said: “the seizures are gone”. I said “I am happy that you feel better, that the medication worked”. He said, “no, I didn't take any medication. I believe in human beings again” - and embraced me. For the first time I was able to understand the nature of my work: a person who had been through all this experience, the world is full of threat, it's alien, hostile and they still have to live among human beings. And we have to help them building this trust up again somehow. We treat them, take care of them and they slowly start believing in us, so we are the bridge between the victims and the other human beings. When I treat him as a physician the most important thing is not to act only as a physician. When they come to my clinic, all the vital signs that are usually checked by a nurse I take: pressure, the temperature, weight. And I have more frequent appointments with them than regular, and the clients have my personal cell phone number, if they have any problem they call me. All these things make a tremendous difference. Sometimes it's medically not justified but it promotes healing.

It was very difficult for me to accept, that when you were tortured, it's something you are going to carry with you all your life. It is fixed in the amigdala, the part of your brain that also takes care of your safety. The amigdala can ring the alarm to put on a defense even long after the danger is gone. And this happens in torture, too. The memory of the torture is always there. So the afterlife of torture is a chronic process when the intensity of the symptoms keep changing but they are never completely gone. And many keep it as a secret, they don't talk about it, they are ashamed. All victims suffer, even the ones who don't show it. That's why our center has to be a place with an open door.

Recently I went back to Chile doing a training there related to assessing the status of victims and even after 40 years the memories were so vivid as if everything happened yesterday.

**- Do you have similar personal experience? I am asking this because you are from Chile and you were with President Allende throughout the military coup as his doctor.**

Yes, that's true, but for many years I thought it didn't touched me emotionally.

I was tortured by definition, because when I was outside the palace they hit me and it fractured a rib, but I never thought I am going to be killed in spite there was no reason to believe that.

Compared to what happened there with many others I didn't feel I fit in the category of torture victims and I was fine until about 15 years later someone asked me to write about my experience. When for the first time I had to systematically remember the events, the past and all my emotions that had been hidden for so long appeared. In 2 weekends I wrote around 14 pages. It was very difficult and personal. Even so many years later I had to go through the process of mourning. It has never been published.

**- Can it partly be because you as a witness of Allende's last hours had a secret for many decades?**

Yes, but that's different, I didn't keep it because of myself.

For many years I was convinced I mustn't say that Allende committed suicide. But then in 2007 a Chilean journalist here in LA asked me and I finally came out with it. There was only one physician before who kept saying this and now we were two. Why have I been silent for so long? Because for me it was a political issue. I rather let people believe that Allende was killed by Pinochet and the military who I think are criminals. But now it's a historical issue. Now we, the witnesses have to take part in uncovering history and have to say exactly what happened. Sometimes I find myself in bad situations because many people would like to believe that Allende fought until the very end. This is not true. International investigators examined his body and every bit of information twice. I had to make a statement as a witness and the final conclusion was that Allende committed suicide. For me the most important thing was that his family also accepted it.

**- Can you describe the day of the military coup?**

Chile, military coup, September 11. 1973., Tuesday. The same date and day of the week as the attack against the Twin Towers.

But I have to start from further back. I was involved in politics from high school. Then as a medical student I was the vice president of the Chilean Association of Universities (?) and later when I was already working in a hospital I became part of the personal medical group of the president, Salvador Allende. Because Allende had some minor cardiac problem, we created a coronary care unit of 1 bed (this is the part of the hospital where patients are treated for life threatening heart and circulatory problems) in the house of the president and I was in charge of it. We also had a full surgical unit in the government palace in case of war or conflict – what finally happened.

On the day of the military coup I entered the palace around 8 o'clock. When the fight began President Allende invited all of us to a salon inside of the government palace and he said everybody had to leave – including his 2 daughters - with the exception of the ones who have some function to help there. The cease-fire was a good opportunity for that. About 18 people stayed, 8 of them were physicians and so was Allende.

Then from the direct line on his desk he gave three radio speeches in which he he described what would happen in the coming years in Chile. These were incredibly good predictions and shocking talks.

Then the fight began, they fired with everything they had, like machine guns. All the windows were destroyed and they begun to send gas into the building. There were moments when it was difficult even to breath. At around noon the Hawker Hunter, the fighter came and began to bomb the government palace and started a fire. We were in one of the sides of the building and the bombing happened in the midline so we were not in close contact with it but when I see the film of what happened it looks terrible and it's emotionally very difficult for me. When at around 2 o'clock, Allende decided he was going to surrender, we put up the white flag we made from tablecloths and people began to leave the building. I have sharp memories of that moments: Allende was coming towards us from a long corridor in the second floor, he didn't stop, didn't talk, passed us, opened the door of the Independence saloon, went inside and closed the door. He was completely alone. Then because probably all of us thought something similar in the same time, we opened the door. He was sitting in a chair in front of us, and in the next moment his face disappeared. I knew exactly what happened: he killed himself. He put a machine gun under his chin and fired. It was terrible. We didn't go inside of the room but began walking slowly down the stairs while the soldiers started going up. The army was not in the saloon before.

**- Then what happened with you?**

I had a white medical coat on but in spite of it they took me as a prisoner with the others. They lined us up against the wall – I turned around and faced them, they hit me, that's when my rib got broken. Then at around 8 o'clock in the evening they unexpectedly let us go.

**- What do you think of Chile of that time, the presidency of Allende and the coup?**

Again, I have to step back a little. Chile is the longest democracy in Latin America. In the republic's 200 years of history the power slowly moved from the right to the center. And the workers have been organized for a hundred years because Chile was the only country in the world to produce saltpeter, the fertilizer. The communist party in Chile was created in 1925 and the socialist party in 1935. After the Russian and the Italian the Chilean was the biggest communist party. Salvador Allende was a special person in politics because he was a democratically elected Marxist president, a first in the world in that sense – whom the US perceived as a threat.

Nixon and Kissinger had a plot with 3 stages. First they tried to prevent him from getting enough votes, then prevent his election in the Chilean congress, then he should have failed as president, but he didn't so they had to eliminate him by force and the coup came. We have documents about all these.

**- What do you think about these events now?**

This was one of the biggest mistakes of the US. If they left Allende alone, probably he wouldn't have been elected in the next period, but someone else from the center, because this is what follows from the political history of Chile. But the Americans didn't understand that. I could discuss this with people even of the State Department and they admitted this was a big mistake.

**- You mentioned that you recently visited Chile to collect data on compliance with human rights during the dictatorship. What did you learn from this?**

I collected data month by month between the coup in 1973 and the elections in 1989 from the publications of Human Rights Commission in Chile. It's interesting, I found that the mortality data shows an unimodal distribution, meaning that it has one peak: it's very high during the coup and a bit after then it drops and stays low. The reason is that the political price of murder is very high so they knew before who exactly they have to kill and they did it fast and effectively.

The statistics of torture and detention is completely different. We don't have data from the first 5 years in spite there were human right organizations in Chile but I have to assume there were also a lot of detentions initially. Then relatively few, and from about 1985 we can see a tremendous elevation of detentions. It seems, by then people in Chile were so fed up of the military that they felt "no matter what happens with us we have to try to get them out" and they started going to the streets. The system answered the only way it knew, with more repression, more detention, more torture. So it's mostly a bimodal distribution, with two peaks of detention at the beginning and at the end of the period. There is a time in between with little mortality and little detention – this is when the leaders have control over the country. I call this the "statistical expression of fear". One can see the fear in the graph. You know from experience that it's dangerous to be in the opposition so you don't do anything, don't talk to anybody and suffer alone. This is when the military controls the country. And later you think there is no way to live like this anymore and you go to the street.

It happened in your own country, in Hungary in relation to Russia in 1956. There was a moment when people began to go out and protest. And we know what came out of this: revolution.

**- What do you think, is Chile back to its original democratic track?**

All dictators' big ambition is to be elected at some point. Pinochet was no different. Because he would have never expected that all the oppositional forces could to be united against him, he agreed to the elections. And so it happened, Chile defeated Pinochet with his own constitution, in a democratic way. What was even more unusual, that the dictator left power. There was a lot of doubt if he would leave or not but then the military also "helped him" in the decision.

Since then we have a democratic government and it has been an uninterrupted process of democracy. Although we are not a completely democratic country yet, because a lot of elements of the Pinochet constitution still stands, but this is going to be changed now. I hope we go back to the times before the military coup. Michelle Bachelet is our president again. This is very interesting, because she is a physician, a single mother of three, an atheist. A member of the socialist party. A woman. With all these conditions in the US she wouldn't be able to hold any political positions. And in Chile she is the president for the second time.

**- Let's go back to our original topic. Am I right to think that your experience in Chile during the coup and after played a role in your decision to work on the rehabilitation of torture victims?**

I remained in Chile for another 3 years and I become one of the few physicians of the underground movement. It was a difficult task: when these people got wounded, couldn't go to any hospitals because these were controlled by the military so I had to go to the places where they were. A lot of people around me began to die or disappear or showed signs of torture, it become very risky. In the meantime, from very early, the Christian churches started organizing the protection of the victims. This is something different from what happened in Argentina for example. In Argentina the Catholic church was part of the repression. Why? Because they don't have the separation of the church and state in Argentina. It could happen that some part of the government were paying the catholic priests' salaries there. In Chile the separation of the church and state took place a century before, that's why the Catholic church and the other religious groups were on the side of the victims basically from day 1. This is extremely important because especially at the beginning a lot of help, even legal help came from the church. The first organization dealing with torture victim rehabilitation and treatment, called FASIC, was founded in Chile in 1975 by the Christian churches and I was part of it. I have been treating victims ever since.

**- You have been doing it for many decades now in the United States, where you funded PTV, a complex rehabilitation center for victims of torture.**

Yes, I would be happy if PTV was out of job. But unfortunately torture has always existed, and there is no end in sight.

I funded PTV with Ana Deutsch, an Argentinean psychologist who was a refugee herself. Before that I had a job at UCLA as an epidemiologist and later I started my practice as an internist as well as working with torture victims. This was a kind of political statement while practicing my profession in the same time. We have been running PTV for almost 34 years now. We were volunteers for a long time, until we got a grant first from the United Nations about 15 years ago, then from the government. We started with 5-6 volunteers and now we pay 12 people, have a budget of close to the million from different grants and we take care of 3-400 people a year. For free we give them medical and psychological help that includes talk and art therapy, too. We also provide them social and legal help either here or through our partners and partner organizations.

**- I heard you would like to step back from this kind of work in the near future. Why?**

Because if I have to work all the time I don't have time for other things. And now I need time for studying the mind and the brain.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this topic was exciting for doctors, then the brain kind of got forgotten for about a hundred years. But recently, in the last 20 years there have been such tremendous development in this area that I think is going to impact the 21 century fundamentally. Recently the European Union gave 1 billion Euro for the Human Brain Project that works on neuroscience, computing and medicine i.e. plans to get an insight into what makes us human, build fascinating new computing technologies and develop revolutionary treatments for brain disorders. And last year the US announced their own project that's called Brain Initiative or Brain Activity Mapping and they spend billions of dollars on mapping the activity of each and every neurons in the human brain. Here in the US a lot of money is spent on military research and its results can be applied in everyday life later. The internet began as a military tool and now we use it. We have to take advantage of the fact that the military wants power.

What I would like to get closer to is how torture and aggression effect the brain and the mind. Torture is used to control the mind. It works through the senses. But we don't know exactly what's going on inside. It would be great to have a better description of this processes so sooner or later we could base our interventions more on science and eventually have more effective treatments for the victims. This is what I want to do in the next few years.

I won't be able to see most of the results but I help to prepare the future.