

Choosing Not to Hate

A COVENANT MINISTER
AND HIS FAMILY LOOK
BACK AT THEIR ESCAPE
FROM GENERAL
PINOCHET'S CHILE
ALMOST THIRTY YEARS
AGO.

AMY ADAIR

Like many Americans, Luis and Flor Retamal of Chicago, Illinois, were sickened by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. What made it worse for them was the memories it brought back of September 11, 1973—the day that their lives in Chile were turned upside down. On that day, General Augusto Pinochet overthrew democratically elected President Salvador Allende in a bloody coup.

This time, though, their government does not see them as the enemy. They know their country and their president will protect them.

In 1973, Luis and Flor had been married for nearly two years, with one small child and another on the way, when Luis was arrested, tortured, and sentenced to death on the charge of being pro-Allende. Pinochet's military had been ordered to eliminate any political supporter of President Allende. Since Luis was a member of the socialist group and the president of the student body at State Technical University in Puerto Montt, he was deemed an enemy of the new dictator.

Two years and seven months later,

Retamal, who is now the pastor of Iglesia del Pacto Grace (Grace Covenant Church) in Chicago, was released and ordered to flee the country. The Retamal family is living testament to the miracles God works in even the darkest places.

Safe inside their church, which is neatly tucked in a residential neighborhood on Chicago's north side, the Retamals say that their life in Chile seems like a half-remembered movie. "I have lots of mental blocks," Flor says.

She is surrounded by her two grown daughters, teenage son, and her husband. They converse in both Spanish to English as they tell their story.

"Our life is like a novel," Flor says, taking off her coat and settling back into a well-worn leather chair in the church's basement. "They took Luis when I was six-months pregnant with Ana."

The Retamals' children have heard this story before, but it seems to be just as painful as the first time they heard it. Patty, twenty-nine, who works for Covenant World Mission, was not yet two years old when her dad was arrested. Still, she says, she remembers that day.



The Retamals (from left, Luis holding Patty, Flor holding Ana) board the plane to leave Chile.

“Big men came in. They had lots of guns,” she says, then pauses. “I’m still nervous around people who are in the military. I can still hear them cocking their guns.” Patty was so traumatized by the arrest that a doctor prescribed Valium for her as a toddler.

When Luis was arrested, he was interrogated by Pinochet’s military junta. They thought he possessed arms and knew the whereabouts of Allende’s daughter.

“[At first,] I didn’t know I was condemned to die,” Luis says. “[Then] someone told me. I figured I didn’t have a single chance to live.”

Luis says he spent the earlier part of his life as an atheist. It wasn’t until he realized that he was going to be executed that he turned to God.

“I remembered what I had heard when my mother took me to church,” Luis says. “I had an idea of what salvation was. I promised the Lord if he got me out of here, I would serve him.”

Luis spent two years and seven months in prison, with 194 days spent in isolation. Along with hundreds of other prisoners, Luis was brutally beaten. His hand, jaw, and lower vertebrae were broken.

All the prisoners were hit, hung, and shocked. Some were forced to endure the submarine—asphyxiation by a plastic bag. It was not unusual for the prisoners to be beaten so badly that they required hospitalization. Even in the hospital prisoners were often tortured.

When Luis was around other prisoners he was blindfolded, so he could not see his fellow inmates. “We did talk

to each other,” he says. “We would always say, ‘If you get out, tell my wife that I’m alive.’” Meanwhile, Pinochet’s “Caravan of Death” was making its way down through the country. It went from city to city, jail to jail, to torture and kill the political prisoners.

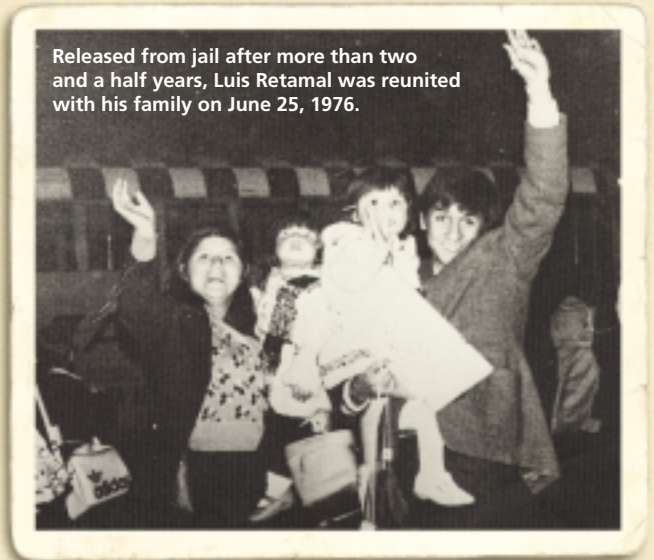
“It was somebody’s job to torture people,” says Ana, twenty-seven, a school-teacher at Albany Park Multi-Cultural Academy in Chicago. “It was somebody’s job to kill people. They were regular people who were brainwashed to the point where the screams and blood of their victims no longer bothered them.”

The Caravan of Death stopped in the city just to the north of where Luis was being held. The Interna-

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tional Bank stopped the Caravan of Death, Luis explains. Pinochet’s government wanted a loan from the bank, but it insisted that the government release some of their prisoners. Pinochet allowed a certain number of prisoners to go. Luis was among those who were released. He was told he would have to leave the country.

Before being reunited with his family, Luis was sent to a prison in Santi-



Released from jail after more than two and a half years, Luis Retamal was reunited with his family on June 25, 1976.



Flor and Luis Retamal

ago for what he calls a “cleaning up period” to wait for information of where he and his family would go. Although he was still in prison he now had a television and a warm shower.

Flor was also allowed to visit Luis. By this time, she was caring for her second daughter, Ana, who was born while Luis was in prison. Flor had to fill out all the necessary paperwork to obtain visas so the family could leave the country. She was told to select the countries she would most like to immigrate to. Among her top choices were England, Germany, and Sweden.

“The United States had over 5,000 applications and they would only let

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400 refugees in,” Flor says. “I just hoped the Lord would give us the best country.”

On June 25, 1976, Luis was brought to the airport to be reunited with his family. There the Retamals were surprised to learn they were headed to the United States. They had two small suitcases and twenty American dollars that someone

had given them. They boarded a plane and watched their native country, where all their friends and relatives lived, disappear beneath the clouds.

The Retamals were headed to Chicago where they would meet a new family—Congregation Solel, a Jewish synagogue in Highland Park, Illinois,



Ana, Samuel, and Patty Retamal.

always worried about us,” Patty says. “Every Christmas she made sure we had toys.”

“We stayed in contact for years,” Flor says. “They were like parents to us, but Phyllis died about seven years ago and we lost contact with the synagogue. We don’t know anyone there anymore.”

a different point of view, it’s my duty. I have to do it with love.”

The Retamals taught their three children (their son, Samuel, was born in the U.S.) to forgive those who committed even the most heinous crimes. “I’m surprised they didn’t transmit anger,” Patty says. “We were taught to forgive. My mother used to say, ‘Do you

remember those soldiers, they were just doing a job. They are people.’”

The Retamals always hoped that they would move back to their home country when Pinochet was out of office. They have visited Chile several times since 1990, when Pinochet stepped down from power, but have

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which had agreed to sponsor them.

Rabbi Robert J. Marx of Congregation Solel compared Chilean refugees to Jews who were sheltered during the Holocaust. “Historically in light of the Jewish experience, we know what it is to suffer,” he told a local newspaper on November 4, 1976. “During the Holocaust, Jews in Holland and Denmark were saved from the Nazis because they were sheltered by Protestant and Catholic families.”

The synagogue gave the Retamals financial, and more importantly, emotional support. One member found Luis a job at a local factory. Another member provided a studio apartment stocked with clothes, towels, toothbrushes, and food.

“That first night we all slept on the floor,” Flor says. The family laughs at the memory. “We couldn’t find the bed because it pulled out from the wall.”

The Retamals grew very close to Phyllis and Mike Santullano, a couple from Congregation Solel. “Phyllis

Even with the support from the synagogue, the Retamals were still in a country where they didn’t know the language and they didn’t have a family. “It wasn’t easy,” Flor says. “I cried for two years. But we had faith in God that things would work out, even if we didn’t like it.”

Shortly after immigrating, the entire family began to learn English. Flor and Luis worked on college degrees. Flor received a bachelor’s degree in education from National-Louis University in 1978. Luis eventually attended North Park Seminary. While still a student, he became pastor at Iglesia del Pacto Grace.

Once a man from El Salvador visited the church. The man admitted to Luis that he had been part of a group that had tortured many people in his home country. Luis welcomed him into the church.

“I accepted the call to ministry,” Luis says. “I can choose not to hate someone. I have to minister to people with

decided to remain in Chicago. “Now we have roots in America,” Flor says.

Still, the Retamals remain interested in the future of Chile. Like many Chileans, they have been waiting to hear if the dictator who sent them fleeing from their home country will be tried for crimes against humanity. Pinochet’s case has been bogged down by legal wrangling. On July 9, 2001, Pinochet was deemed medically unfit for trial.

Pinochet who suffers from high blood pressure and diabetes, will probably never be tried for his crimes. But even if Pinochet is never punished, the Retamals have found peace in their faith.

“Deep inside I’m still hurt,” Luis says. “My oldest brother has been missing since 1973. I don’t know if he’s alive or if he was killed. But the people who tortured him will have to face the Lord. I’m not happy about that. Facing God’s judgment is a million times more terrible than torture.” □