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Going home to a Chile reception: You can and can't go back, Pinochet-era exiles report. Their presence stirs unpleasant memories for those who stayed put. Says Isabel Allende: `` . . . they had to take all the repression and they built this new country and now these people have come to benefit."

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Illustrations: Photo: Canadian Press / SANTIAGO TODAY: The socialist Carlos Altamirano says he did not recognize Chile on his return. `` . . . it took a long time to accept that I was back in my own country. It was another country."

Photo: Helen Hughes, Freelance / VOLODIA TEITELBOIM: The old communist was a man without a country because he was man without papers after 15 years abroad.

SANTIAGO - When Volodia Teitelboim returned home after a 15-year exile in Moscow, government officials told him he didn't exist. They couldn't find any trace of his past. All references to him had been erased, and he was given the odd task of proving his Chilean nationality. The task seemed even more bizarre since he had been a high-profile, public figure.

He had been elected senator for the Communist party twice, and is author of more than a dozen books, including one of the best biographies of the Nobel laureate, poet Pablo Neruda.

Eventually, officials discovered his name and an indication of where and when he was born in his ex-wife's wedding papers.

Teitelboim relates his story one rainy afternoon in the growing darkness of his living room. He is 82, the same age he notes sardonically, as Chile's former dictator and current senator-for-life, Augusto Pinochet - a man whom Teitelboim has fought his whole life.

Most Chilean exiles who have returned to their country don't need to go to such lengths to prove their identity. Forced to live in faraway foreign countries, their identity is often the only defining fact in their fragmented lives. And it is identity that brings them back. Teitelboim returned to Chile twice, clandestinely, before the end of the dictatorship.

But there was no question that the minute his name was taken off the black list and he was legally allowed to return, that he would do so.

"It was impossible for me to live indefinitely outside of Chile," he said. "I had a big sense of responsibility, a debt with the people. During my exile I worked all day every day for Chile. This was my cause, my reason to exist."

But it's not simply the matter of identity that has brought Chilean exiles back. It is also a fierce and deep connection to the past, to their roots. It is the unbearable tug

of the homeland which evokes the almost-forgotten taste of empanadas, the way the cordillera of the Andes looks at sunset and the smell of the ocean.

In 1973 when a brutal military coup toppled the democratically-elected Marxist regime of President Salvador Allende and led the country into a 17-year dictatorship, almost a million Chileans went into exile, the largest emigration in the country's history. Some exiles returned clandestinely during the height of the dictatorship around 1978; many returned once their names were removed from the military's blacklist; but most returned when democracy did, in 1989. This year, with the first parliamentary and presidential elections, the rate of return increased by 30 per cent from previous years.

The newly elected government, which included more than a handful of former exiles, knew the importance of providing incentives to encourage Chileans to return and implemented financial programs to facilitate their transition.

"The majority of the best people in Chile were expelled. Intellectuals, academics, artists, students, political leaders, trade union leaders, women's leaders," says Teitelboim.

Although 100,000 have returned so far, Chileans believe most exiles will never come back. Of those 100,000, approximately 2,000 returned from Canada, while about 400 of Vancouver's 4,000-member Chilean community have gone home.

It is not easy to measure the impact these retornados have had by bringing home new skills, a broader perspective of the world

and, in some cases, spouses and children who may have never been to Chile.

And perhaps the most difficult thing for retornados is that most of today's Chileans don't want to talk about the past. They want to forget and move on and the presence of returnees stirs memories they buried long ago. Retornados make Chileans uncomfortable when they ask questions about the dark years, the country's political apathy, about the way things have changed.

"Chileans feel that those who left did so because they had done something wrong," says the Chilean writer Isabel Allende in a interview from her home in California. "And in the meantime, for 17 years, they had to take all the repression and they built this new country and now these people have come to benefit."

Ana Maria Quiroz, a former Simon Fraser University professor who returned to Chile in the mid-80s explains: "I wanted to tell people about Canada and my experiences. But people weren't that interested in what happened to you outside. You had to get on the bus, and go with what's happening here."

Carlos Altamirano, who was declared public enemy number one by the military regime when he led Chile's socialist party, was one of the last exiles allowed back after Pinochet lifted all restrictions to repatriation in 1988.

"That first moment, when you arrive, the tension is so great you can't even describe what's happening inside you. The real consciousness comes a long time after when you finally realize that exile is over," he says during an interview at his home.

"Twenty years is such a long time in a person's life. I was relatively young when I left the country. I was 49 and when I came back at 69, I was an old man. And it took a long time to accept that I was back in my own country. It was another country."

Over the years, many retornados have adapted and learned not to ask too many questions. But many of the more outspoken and successful Chileans have remained outside Chile.

"The most famous Chilean writers are exiles," says Altamirano. "It's not just writers. In science, medicine, political science, in all these fields they have done really well. That's the positive side of exile . . . They are the compensation for Pinochet's horrible and brutal acts."

Sometimes referred to as "Pinochet's scholarship," exile has meant professional success for some who have returned. But most who return are neither well-known nor well-off.

Poet Naim Nomez spent 11 years in Toronto and has been back for 11 years.

He uses the metaphor of a drawbridge to explain exile.

"I saw the country like this," he says. "Opening and closing like consciousness. You are a stranger in both countries and yet you belong to both. I still feel a stranger here with several things. I'm very critical of the way of life of Chileans and at the same time I feel fine here. But I also feel that Toronto is my city. I walk through the streets there and find a lot of friends."

For Carmen Silva, a painter who spent 15 years in Ecuador, balancing her love for

her home-in-exile with her love for Chile has been a struggle.

Had she not fought so hard during her exile for the right to return, she may have stayed in Ecuador. "But now I'm back and I feel at home here. My house is too expensive and too noisy, but I won't move because these are my roots. This is grandma's house. This is the stable house. Now I like roots. I never had them before or I didn't know I had them. Now I feel a great sense of belonging."

Altamirano explains the conflict of returning. "I don't have reconciliation of the past and present. I have only been back six years. It should be enough time to reconcile both Chiles, the old with the new, but it's not.

"I have nostalgia for the last countries I lived in. I miss France, the landscape, the nature, the culture . . . When you spend a long time in exile, you are forever in exile. It's hard to redefine your real country, your real home. You have different homes. You don't have one country, one mother. There's lots of mothers."

THE "RETORNADOS"

- Since 1990, the Chilean government, international agencies and non-governmental organizations have had programs to help the returnees.

- Up until 1994, a special government bureau spent \$25 million US to help with moving costs. That included reducing import duties on household items and luxury cars. It also helped retornados get recognition for degrees earned outside the country, provided loans for small businesses and free medical care, which is

not available to other Chileans.

- Chile's state bank also provided loans to small business. The interest rates were 14 per cent, with the money to be paid back over eight years. Nearly 60 per cent of the companies financed under this program have gone bankrupt.

- Among the people who have returned, 86 per cent have families and just 13 per cent were single.

- Of the returnees, 60 per cent were aged 30 to 49 and 34 per cent had a university degree.

- Nearly three of four returnees have settled in Santiago.

- The largest group of returnees came back to Chile from exile in Europe.

- Cori Howard

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