"I Remember"

Ana Maria Barrenechea is a Staff Psychiatrist at Women's College Hospital. She received her medical degree from the University of Chile. After coming to Canada in 1974, she did her residency program in Psychiatry at the University of Toronto. Barrenechea has been involved with numerous community organizations concerned with the problems of the Toronto refugee community. She has also done extensive work with psychiatric evaluations and treatment of political refugees, victims of torture, and their families.

I remember getting to the plane. I had with me a bunch of newspapers and my $10 bill.

This $10 bill was all I had left from a trip abroad some months before the Military coup [in Chile]. I had carefully put it in my pocket, before they had come to search the house (it had been declared illegal to be in possession of any hard currency). They had come with dogs and machine guns. Some of them were country people, they seemed ashamed, they called us "doctor." Some of them were our patients in the NPL clinic. The officers were ruthless. They had left, taking with them some "very consistent proof of our subversive activities" — the poetry and children's books published by the democratic Government publishing company.

With dismay, I found my $10 bill in my pocket again when I was on my way to the military barracks the next day. I was one of the hundreds of people who had been called through the local station the night before. "The following people are to present themselves to the Army before 1500 hours tomorrow or they will be declared outlawed." My $10 bill couldn't go with me, it was dangerous for both of us. So it went very quietly into a friend's pocket and returned to me some days later. That day at the army barracks was the last time I saw a number of people alive. Some already had been imprisoned, killed, or had disappeared. Among the killed were two of my former classmates in medical school, and one of the patients hospitalized in the Psychiatry department I used to work in. Now, as I was leaving the country feeling down, my $10 bill was safe, hidden inside my left shoe.

I had been prohibited from leaving the southern city of Chile where I was working, for nearly two months. I had been fired from my job and banned from entering the local hospital where I used to work. Having had no means of communicating with the rest of my family, I dreaded for their lives. I dreamt many times of my sister, hanging by her long braid, from a butcher's hook as I had seen on the Nazi concentration camps in Germany. (My sister had had her hair cut when I saw her again).

Some of my friends had bought a plane ticket for me and put me on a plane to another Latin American country. I had been given a six-month visa at that country's embassy in Santiago. However, my passport was retained and my visa was reduced to ten days as I arrived.

I was treated very well there. Every time I had an appointment with the authorities, they were very polite and they called me "doctor," even when they interrogated me over and over about my "subversive activities in Chile."

But I had friends, and that kept me going. I felt protected. We shared experiences and did whatever possible to elicit solidarity with our country. Meanwhile, I had no money, and I had become an illegal alien. Was I going to be forced to leave again?

There were again my friends who came to my rescue and directed me to the Canadian Embassy. I remember arriving in Toronto on a Saturday in March 1974. It was a gray day, no snow. What a pity! I wanted to see snow for the first time in my life.

It felt pretty lonely in that hotel room, and not being able to understand anything was a very devastating experience. What a relief it was when I realized there were more refugees in the hotel. I soon learned that there were people to be trusted.

I remember meeting a friend — we had attended medical school together. She was thin and all her hair was grey and she was surrounded by her three children. "This is how a refugee looks," I thought. We all looked the same, I am sure.

I remember waking up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night. I was terrified. They were bombing again. I woke everybody up in the rooming house. Of course, nobody understood. It was June: I didn't know there were thunder storms in Toronto.

I remember the delivery suite where I could hardly communicate with anybody.

I remember being a psychiatry resident in a busy emergency department and when a fellow countryman walked in: "I got drunk just to get the courage to kill myself," he said.

I remember a patient of mine having to be admitted to the hospital. She was terrified and the most sympathetic attitudes of hospital staff were not able to help her with her distress. As soon as I arrived, she said in a panic, "doctor, they have taken away my passport." It took a long time to convince her that she and her passport were safe here.

It seems as if I'm just remembering all of this today, yet, I have been talking about it for fifteen years.

BY ANA MARIA BARRENECHEA