

Solidarity!

Helen Jackson

Refugees from Chile figure centrally in Helen Jackson's new book about politics in Sheffield and the wider South Yorkshire region during the 1980s. She recounts what was achieved, despite Mrs Thatcher. Helen Jackson was elected to Sheffield City Council where, as Chair of Public Works and then Employment, she helped to bring about ground-breaking opportunities for women, unemployed people and poorer communities.

Sharing our home with Chilean families gave an international flavour to our political discussion. The refugees were from different Chilean political groupings, and a wide range of jobs, education and professions. Many were still students, and loved to discuss politics. They had all been active within Allende's Popular Unity movement in Chile and were buoyed by Salvador Allende's electoral success in forming a government, and equally devastated and angered by its violent overthrow with the active support of the US, and the ensuing brutality they suffered under the military regime of Pinochet. We, also political activists, were horrified yet fascinated by their experiences.

Pedro Fuentes came to Sheffield in 1975 followed later by his family. He has vividly described what this meant for them:

'The Cuban Revolution demonstrated that socialism could be achieved in our lifespan. It showed us that the road to socialism was there, it was a matter for us to get together and fight for it. It was a dramatic change, and opened up a wider perspective for my school mates, friends, and family. The final result of the general election in 1970 was fantastic! We gathered together in the centre of Valparaiso – hundreds of people, a full night of joy, congratulating ourselves, and I remember thinking the windows and the doors are starting to open up – to open completely, it is here! We can march and let's enjoy it together, let's embrace it. The feelings on the following days were of a type of self confidence. My head was buzzing with the idea of walking in our neighbourhood, and in the city centre saying 'Well this is us now, this is us!' It was great!

On the day of the coup 11th September 1973, I was in Santiago, 1,670 miles away from Arica, where I was working. In the morning I put the radio on, and there was Allende making his famous speech, denouncing the treason of top army officers, asking people not to resist the coup. It was his 'goodbye speech'. Soon after, the flow of Military Orders started to be broadcast. I saw the very low flight of the British Hawker Hunter aircraft towards the South. They had just bombed the Presidential Palace and the killing field had started.

I was detained at my parents' home and then transported to Arica where I went through torture, interrogation, solitary confinement, and finally – 'luckily' – landed on the part of Arica's jail which had been turned into a so called concentration camp. It was one of the approximately 1,170 concentration camps and clandestine centres for detention and torture in Chile. After nearly two years in prison, I received a letter from the British Embassy in Santiago saying that I had been granted a visa to live in the UK if I wished to.

I arrived in the UK in October 1975. After a short stay in the Sinclair reception centre for Chilean and Latin American refugees, in Shepherd's Bush, London, I and another 'compañero' whom I had met on the airplane in Santiago got on a coach with destination Sheffield! When the coach arrived at the old Bus Station we were welcomed by two fellow Chileans and two British people. It was a cold and dark night in November. After introductions Nick Howard

invited me to come with him to his house, and Tom Owen did the same to my friend Luis. When Nick and I arrived at his address, I was welcomed by his wife, and his children: two daughters and a son. I was given the bedroom of one of the daughters. That night began an experience for me of what was going to be a long journey of new friendships and most of all sincere and transparent solidarity from the Labour Movement.'



Pedro Fuentes pictured on his way to the airport and a new life in the UK.

These Chileans were not just young male revolutionaries. Their wives and children were able to follow their husbands, freshly released from prison, into exile. First hand accounts like Pedro's about the Popular Unity government led by Salvador Allende, that generated hope and optimism after his election victory in 1970, struck a chord with us in the Sheffield Labour Movement, fresh from the recent general election victory in October '74,

which had played a positive role in securing their release and safety. Glasgow dockers' action in blacking the delivery of spare parts for Chilean fighter planes had inspired Judith Hart, the new Secretary of State for International Development in the Wilson administration, to redirect funds intended to support Santiago University to the Chile solidarity movement which set up a Europe wide system whereby political prisoners were given the option of exile in lieu of continued imprisonment.

Soon after the election I was contacted by the Chile Solidarity campaign to see if we were able to host one of the refugees recently arrived in UK. We agreed. Bernabe Alvarez, Ester, his wife, and Barney their 4-year-old son, were the third family to come to Sheffield. We rearranged the bedrooms, so that our children slept in the attic and they settled in. Their story differed from Pedro's. Bernabe worked at the *Popular Unity* newspaper as a photographer. He had witnessed the morning after the coup in Santiago, and realised his place of work was deserted. He had no resources or money, and a wife and young child to care for. For some months he tried to get by using his camera to take portrait pictures for the identity cards which had become essential for every Chilean to possess. After some months he decided to travel to Peru to get away from the constant danger. He sought asylum and Ester, now pregnant, and Barney managed to join him. Travel to Europe was agreed and they landed in London. Once in Sheffield they settled in as part of our family, teaching us how to make the perfect 'empanada', a meat pie with an olive inside. After completing their short English course Bernabe was offered work at Shardlow's engineering company where the union influence was strong. Barney got to know our children and the local school offered him a place once he was 5 years old. We travelled to Liverpool together in September 1975 to remember the victims of the military coup (11th September 1973), and protest against the Pinochet regime. Natalie was born, and although it was lovely to have a baby at home again, a house became available shortly afterwards in the Attercliffe area, where they still live today. Other families followed to live with us in Grenoside over the following eight or nine years, and on the whole we found the community supportive, if somewhat surprised! Luis Silva, a self-employed copper miner, who fled across the Andes to Argentina where he was caught and imprisoned, was sponsored through Peter Heathfield, the NUM organiser in north-east Derbyshire. Juan from the same prison in Arica as Pedro, had corresponded with our local Labour Party before he arrived, followed by Ana, a dress maker who cooked delicious fried rice. Later, they went to live in Liverpool. Another temporary lodger, Mario, had been a member of Allende's armed forces,

and had been badly tortured and damaged. He was silent and lonely. He sought comfort roaming through the Grenoside woodlands that reminded him of back home and wrote endless sheets of poetry. He now lives in Chile. Finally, Roberto and Eysen, who also had children of school age, stayed for some time. Their son, also called Roberto, wrote us a moving letter about his memories of sharing life with our family, when he was 21.

My role in the Solidarity movement was to work within its Human Rights committee to match up names from those listed as political prisoners with trade unions or organisations in Sheffield who would likewise offer to sponsor an individual, help them into suitable work and offer temporary hospitality in their home. We would contact an appropriate trade union or institution, including the AUEW for industrial workers, the University and Labour groups for students, the NUM for former miners, and so on. We would then write to the prisoner, directly to their prison governor with a copy to the CIIR (Catholic Institute for International Relations) which helped to arrange their release and travel overseas. It was very exciting to receive a letter from Chile, for example from Juan in Arica prison (Bernabe helped me with the Spanish). We met them in person at the bus station as Pedro describes.

Political aspirations and international solidarity became part of our home environment and social activities. Listening to their stories, told in broken English and many gestures, with our children in the background, sharing our household with their families, hearing from the women as we



The Chilean refugee community soon joined in Sheffield life and made the city their home.

cooked our meals together about the terror of the coup, and listening to inspiring songs and music of Victor Jara, murdered in the stadium where he had performed to packed crowds of Allende supporters, left a deep impression. We were proud that the election of the Labour government in 1974 had really made a difference! Pedro described how:

‘Soon I started to feel completely at home, in terms of the political and economic

dynamic of this city. Politically, the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire' was an ideal place for us Chilean refugees. In the early 80s the Red Flag was flown on the Town Hall on May Day. Later the Chilean flag would fly every 11th of September at the top of the Sheffield Town Hall as homage to victims of the dictatorship. There was a strong Sheffield Chile Solidarity Committee group chaired by Roger Barton, with Helen Jackson, Peter Heathfield Secretary of Derbyshire Union of Miners, and many others.

With its 7 hills Sheffield resembles Valparaíso, my home city, whilst the industrial sectors were more like Concepcion with its coal mining, heavy steel industry, and the weather... All this provided a kind of cushion to our landing onto our new hometown, with our one-way passports forbidding a return to Chile, partially alleviating the baggage of loss, suffering, frustration and the moral dimension of change.

Our community members in exile used to be militants of different political parties back home, but now everybody shared the same ideology which facilitated both individual and the group's involvement in support of social and political activities. Its prevailing theme was guided by clear political, ideological and moral focus: *solidarity!* This was particularly the case after the general election of 1979 which brought Margaret Thatcher into government as we saw her clear sympathy with the Pinochet regime's neo-liberal economics. Members of the community brought the Chilean national flag to demos and events of that political period. An indicator of the actual integration process into Sheffield's community was the slow disappearance of the Chilean flag in such events, although individual members of the community continued to participate. Chilean coal miners in exile actively supported the long Miners' Strike of 1984-85. With our community unanimity we involved ourselves in a plethora of national and local events, whether demonstrations, pickets, marches, fund raising, or international delegations.

A large majority of Chileans in this region, and elsewhere, were extremely eager to leave the state's support mechanisms by engaging in training, further and higher education and employment. The second generation of Chileans have also done this confirming a positive trend, so that university students, teachers, young professionals, workers, shanty town dwellers and trade unionists, supported by the local solidarity movement and many individuals, have all made this city their home.'

The Chilean refugee community joined in Sheffield life soon after they arrived. Many found work in steel works negotiated for them through shop stewards committees, whether driving a horizontal crane, furnace men, working in the melting shops, or as cleaners. They were encouraged to put



Solidarity! Many Chilean members of the Sheffield community, including Pedro Fuentes, joined us in local social and political activities.

their names on the council house waiting list by the local authority, which agreed to pay the accommodation costs of a ‘Saturday school’ run by themselves to ensure their increasing number of children learnt about their Chilean background and fluent Spanish as well as the English they were learning at school during the week. Isilda Lang spoke recently about her arrival in Sheffield in 1977 from being a nanny with a military family in Chile, loyal to President Allende, whose eldest son was condemned to death and the family maltreated.

As she described the trauma of her experience and her exile as a refugee in Sheffield she told me how she first had the idea of making a patchwork from pieces of material and their memories of life in their homeland:

‘I was able to get a job with ‘Sheffield Homestart’ because of my former work and training in Chile. We lived and worked in the Burngreave area of Sheffield, and I made friends with the wife one of the local vicars, who wondered what she and the community could help with. We together decided to collect wool and material so that we, along with the local community, could make pictures – patchwork scenes, known in Chile as *arpilleras* – using knitted shapes and scraps of material of our memories, and our journey to Sheffield. What started

with a simple idea grew with members of the local community joining in. Recently I was proud that our work was exhibited not just in Burngreave but also in the city's Millennium Gallery, and elsewhere when Joan Jara came to visit.'

Isilda's story is an important example of how welcoming political refugees has expanded Sheffield's culture and gave meaning to its present title as the first 'City of Sanctuary' in the UK.



A Chilean 'Arpillera' called 'Jornada de Nuestras Vidas' ('Journey of Our Lives') a large patchwork made by the Grupo Andes.

People's Republic of South Yorkshire

by Helen Jackson

This is the story of how class solidarity translated into creative and radical local initiative, with fairness at its core, during the 1970s and 1980s. Contributors took the experience into their later work, lives and careers. Helen Jackson was one of them. The author's historical and political narrative merges with her own reflections as a woman in politics, so that we see how political action delivers change and understanding at an individual as well as a societal level.

Price: £12.99 | ISBN: 978 0 85124 8967 | 320 pages | A5 format

www.spokesmanbooks.org