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## SOUTH AMERICAN DIARY

Chile: Letter-writing for Freedom

I had barely arrived in Cork on my recent trip home when my good friend Father Tony Gill SMA gave me the news.

"Do you remember Luis Tricot, a Chilean exile living with his family in Dublin." he said.

I thought for a moment.

"Would he be the same person we visited together in a flat somewhere near Ringsend, and told us so many stories of his experiences as a South American living in Ireland"

The telephone went silent for just a moment.

"Yes, yes indeed, that was him alright. He came here with his wife about a year after the Coup in Chile in 1974 but his two children are Irish as they were born in Dublin."

I then recalled of how different he found the way of rearing children in Ireland compared to his own country.

"Well" Father Gill said, "There is bad news. He went back to Chile a few months ago as his name was taken off Pinochet's black list. About two weeks ago he was picked up by the police and worse of all, he has been so badly tortured that they have damaged his spine. He is now in Prison Hospital confined to bed".

I could not but heave a long sigh at the news.

"Not again. When will all this type of thing ever stop?" I asked myself.

I soon discovered that the Irish Chilean Committee was organizing a special campaign for his freedom. They were sending printed leaflets around the country asking people to write to

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'the Chilean authorities petitioning that Luis be released and allowed to come back to Ireland where he can get proper treatment for his injuries. The basic request is that you send a letter to the Chilean Minister of the Interior, Mr. Ricardo Garcia and a get-well card to Luis in prison hospital. That brings us to the heart of the matter; How effective is letter-writing for human rights?

This is a question which must enter everybody's mind when they are invited to take part in this type of campaign. I have been consulted about it on many occasions. I can only say on the basis of my own experience in the matter that the answer to that question is very clear. Letter-writing can be more effective than what we could ever even imagine. Let me explain.

You always have the doubt when you send your letter to an address that has been given to you, in a country you know absolutely nothing about, and pleading for a person whom you do not know; "Well, my letter most certainly will never arrive in the first place and if by some chance it does, it will find its way very quickly into the waste paper basket." In any case, we ask ourselves, how on earth can we be taken seriously by a foreign government as our own weight in the matter can be no more than that of the proverbial man or woman in the street which must be nil.

My friends you are indeed wrong. I will try now to show why using Luis' case as an example.

You have just posted your letter to the Interior Minister of Chile. International postal services are better than you think so it will arrive in about a week to the central post



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office in the capital of Chile which is the city of Santiago (A trully magnificent place, by the way, if it was'nt for the government there).

With the sorting of the mail, the whole story begins. Before going into the ministerial bag it will be minutely examined not only by specially assigned postal staff but also by some security agent. Even before it is ever opened it will be recognised for what it is, a human rights letter as they are accustomed to receiving them in Chile.

That may surprise you but I once saw for myself earlier this year when I was asked to translate a box of such letters by a political leader in Venezuela. They were requesting the release of several political prisoners and all came from places such as Greece, Germany, Switzerland, Austria etc. where this man never had any previous contact. The addresses were written in hand-writing or typed but not very professionally so it was easy to recognise from the envelopes that they were not business letters.

Returning then to your letter it will more than likely leave the post office in a selected file. But by that stage, it has provoked some decision-making. In due course it will be opened in the Ministry of the Interior. There a first problem must be resolved, which is of course its translation into Spanish. English is easily translated but if you had written your letter in Irish (and why not?) they would be confronting a major obstacle.

In any case by now they know there is someone in Ireland concerned about a Chilean called Luis Tricé. But in order to asses the letter they must ask some questions.

Who really is the person that has signed the latter? What

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profession does he or she has? Are they influential in Ireland? Who is this Luis Tricot they're so concerned about? Is he that well-known in Ireland as it would seem? Some questions particularly about the history and status of Luis can be easily checked out but others are well nigh impossible to answer.

At some stage a report will have to be drafted and forwarded to the Chilean Foreign Minister calling his attention to the fact that in Ireland at least Chile is getting a negative rating because of Luis's case and that might harm business not only with Ireland but with the EEC. Even a dictatorship as hardened as the Pinochet regime has to worry about international relations otherwise money may well stop flowing into the national exchequer.

At this point there is a definite policy in place which will determine if such an inquiry as you have made, will in fact be answered or simply ignored. In the past, the practice has been to publically disregard such letters. However not acknowledging them in any way backfires on the government as it reinforces the repressive image one has of the regime. Many governments have then for that very reason implemented a new policy of replying to all human right complaints.

In my work we regularly receive letters from El Salvador, Colombia, Peru and Guatemala. The answers vary from some that may accuse the person on whose behalf we are pleading, as being the worst kind of terrorist, others will flatly deny all charges of torture and promise that exhaustive investigations will be carried by the judiciary or some independent body. All letters will be courteous and their



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objective is to convey a positive image of the country, to discredit the victim and to frighten people off the campaign, as no-one wishes to be associated with criminals or terrorists. In fact on this last point many people have their qualms. What in fact if the individual in question has been involved in crime we may ask. Can we receive a guarantee that he or she are innocent.

This is no easy matter to resolve and really there are two approaches. The first places its emphasis on the innocence of the accused, the second looks more at the violations that have taken place against the accused. For instance no person can be legitimately tortured or disappeared or indeed executed without proper legal proceedings. While it is important to know that someone is innocent, I would always emphasise the second approach as our concern is primarily about combating torture, extra-legal executions, political persecution etc. rather than getting into a debate if the individual is guilty or not. If all the prisoners rights are guaranteed then that person will normally go free very quickly, if they are innocent. If they are then found guilty we have least helped in securing the defense of their legitimate rights. Normally there is little or no substance to the accusations, of course.

Returning then to Luis 'TRicot in Chile our letter has sparked off a chain of decisions which can only have a positive effect on his welfare. If the letter is multiplied by hundreds then the effect of the campaign also increases. An awful lot of people are asking about him, they will say. It may not win him immediately his freedom but will certainly better his lot immeasurably. More than likely you will not get any

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reply to your letter as Chile still prefers to ignore all human rights questions. However you can be assured it will have no small effect.

In case you forgot, we also have the case of the get-well card you've sent Luis in prison hospital. Here I feel that Luis will get your card much quicker than you imagine. The Chilean regime is indeed contradictory in many respects and I will tell you the reason for my optimism.

Last year a lawyer whom I had worked with was imprisoned in Chile. While we were working for her release I managed to get the telephone number of the police station where she was being held. I decided to ring long distance.

"Good morning sir" I asked very promptly "May I speak with the lawyer Pamela Pereira whom I believe is in detention there "

"Wait a moment, now.. Who is speaking" answered a voice very curtly. I gave him my name as if it would mean anything to him.

"Just a moment, I must consult first" came the reply.

"Hello", there was now a woman on the line, "With whom do you want to speak" she asked. I said "Pamela Pereira". I then could faintly hear in the background her voice calling:

"Pamela, you have a telephone call today".

Much to my surprise we could have the conversation without any problem. The following day Pamela was released.

That whole incident makes me believe very strongly that your card to Luis will get through.

If you are still doubtful about the effectiveness of letter-writing



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I could list you many cases, including my own, where if it was not for the letters, those people would still probably be in prison or worse still even dead. In fact the most prestigious organization in the whole area of human rights is Amnesty International which has built itself up on letter campaigns for so-called prisoners of conscience. That organization which has now national sections in most countries of the world began in England over twenty years ago when some people began writing letters to free political prisoners. The method is that the prisoner is adopted by a local group who keep insisting over the years if necessary until he or she is freed. It has also been resorted to on an urgent action level to help stop torture. Here telegrams or letters are <sup>sent</sup> to the authorities petitioning for someone that is more than likely being tortured or has been disappeared.

The great advantage of letter-writing is that it is a very simple way at the disposal of everyone whereby we can make our voice heard. We all can scribble a few lines and put them in an envelope.

So, my friends if you have never tried it, gather other friends and write the letters together - it's more fun that way.

Who knows but the day will come when a person very much like who was unfortunate enough to be imprisoned unjustly or tortured will knock on your door just to say thank you for helping save their life. That makes it all very much worthwhile.

Finally we have heard that Luis Tricot is at last walking and will be charged for some lesser offense than expected. So you see how it works ...