

**Letters from Overseas**  
**Kathleen Stephenson Writes from Brazil**

September 2011

**The testimony of a political prisoner**

My letter this time is a little different.

A military dictatorship ruled in Brazil from 1964 to 1985. Two of my CESE colleagues (Eliana Rolemberg and Jose Carlos Zanetti) and several other ecumenical movement friends were imprisoned or tortured or both during this period. Eliana was asked to give a public testimony, as you will read, regarding her own experiences in prison.



With very warm greetings to all my dear ones. That means you!

Kathleen

**A Public Act of Repatriation: Never Again**  
São Paulo, Brazil

*On June 14, 2011, Eliana Rolemberg delivered her testimony as a former political prisoner during the military dictatorship in Brazil. She was participating in a Public Act of Repatriation of documentation collectively entitled Brasil: Nunca Mais (Brazil: Never Again). The project was financed by the World Council of Churches and coordinated by Pastor Jaime Wright, Presbyterian, and Cardinal Evaristo Arns, Archdiocese of São Paulo, from 1979 to 1985.*

*The documents had been removed from Brazil to ensure that they would not be destroyed and were held in the archives of the World Council of Churches and the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago. This day celebrated the [repatriation](#) of one million pages on microfilm and 10,000 unedited pages of correspondence and marks the founding of [Brasil: Nunca Mais Digital](#).*

*Eliana is the Executive Director of CESE (Coordenadoria Ecumênica de Serviço) in Salvador, Brazil. CESE was founded in 1973 by Christian churches in Brazil to strengthen social movements in the struggle for human rights and democracy. Since then CESE has provided financial support for projects and initiatives undertaken by civil society organizations and groups in Brazil. Eliana was imprisoned in February 1970, sentenced by the Second Military Court of São Paulo to two years in prison, and released shortly before completing that sentence after appeals to the Supreme Military Court.*

*One of the friends Eliana mentioned is Anivaldo Padilha, who now works with Koinonia, also a United Church partner. In the 1960s, Anivaldo was a Methodist youth leader and member of the ecumenical movement in Latin America. He participated in the struggle for democracy during the military dictatorship and was imprisoned for one year in 1970. He was in exile in the United States in 1971 and returned to Brazil in 1984.*

*What follows is a translation of Eliana's testimony during the Public Act of Repatriation that was given in Portuguese.*

## **The testimony of a political prisoner**

It is not easy to talk about what happened during those years of the military dictatorship.

Nor is it possible to forget.

Always, I remember the moment when Anivaldo and I drove to the home of the uncle of two friends who are no longer with us.

The street was almost deserted. Just a mother pushing her baby carriage. That was the scene they had set for us. I didn't go in the house. Anivaldo went in to pick up a package of material pertaining to a survey we had done with other young Methodists and a man, wearing a Polytechnic University jacket, came to the door and told me to come in too. For a moment, he said.

So began the terror.

We were pushed into a car and driven to a place that I later found out was called *Operação Bandeirantes*, which was not, at that time, designated as a legal prison. Many who were taken to that place simply disappeared. We were met by a group of angry men who formed a gauntlet. They all kicked and punched us and called us foul names.

I was thrown into a cell with another woman whose name, as I later found out, was Damaris. Her husband had been killed in front of her and in front of their young children. At first, Damaris and I were afraid even of each other.

I spent two nights denying who I was. But electric shocks, simulated gunshots, and other physical torture was easier to endure than threats against my husband and my baby daughter, who was just eight months old.

Twenty days in this hell felt like an eternity...

Other young Methodists were brought to us to identify. I was afraid that identifying them meant they too would be tortured.

Meals came once a day. I could not eat and they threatened me because they thought I was on a hunger strike.

Everything was terrifying. I would need to go to the bathroom but was afraid I would be drenched with water and then their electric shocks would be much more painful applied to wet skin. Staying in the cell felt safer. But, came the sound of keys in the door and I knew when it opened I would be taken again to the torturers.

Three teams including about eight torturers took turns in the small torture room. Alone or together, Anivaldo and I were played off against each other.



There was one time when an Army lieutenant (who said he was a Baptist) read Bible passages aloud while he watched us being tortured.

We came to understand that our torturers too were afraid. One morning, my cellmate, Damaris, and some other prisoners were released in exchange for the Japanese Consul of São Paulo, who had been kidnapped by people from her political organization. We had realized that something was happening during the night before they took her. The leader of one of the teams asked what we would do with him if the situation were to change one day in our favour. The next morning, Damaris was released and I was taken for questioning by CENIMAR (Information Centre of the Navy).

When she arrived in Mexico after her release, Damaris was interviewed by journalists and she told them where I was. She told them I had a baby daughter just a few months old and that our torturers had said I would be killed. There were repercussions in Brazil and Anivaldo and I were then transferred to DEOPS (the Department of Social and Public Order) and our incarceration was legally recognized.

At DEOPS too, we lived through moments of sheer terror but were sustained by a strong sense of camaraderie. We always sang when someone left to be interrogated to transmit hope and then sang to welcome them when they returned.

Some never returned.

The next phase of our imprisonment was in the prison called Tiradentes, now demolished, where we prisoners worked together exchanging information and struggling to improve our conditions of incarceration. There, I shared a cell with Dilma Rousseff, who is today the President of Brazil. During my trial, I was taken from Tiradentes back to DEOPS eight times for interrogation.

When I was released at the end of 1971, I had been in prison almost two years although as a result of an appeal to a superior court, my two-year sentence had been reduced to six months. It was joy to be once again in the big wide world, as we called it, and I went first to my parents' home and then joined my husband and daughter, who were in France. But then there came sad news of the death of Celso Cardoso. Celso was a good friend and a member of the group of Methodists who were arrested with Anivaldo and me. There was great sadness and shock too when I learned that Celso had died much earlier while I was in prison. His mother, a marvellous woman, had sent meals to me in prison and always assured me that Celso was well.

There was great happiness too. In 1972, Anivaldo and I were reunited when he came to France. And then we were together again in the 1980s as participants in a World Council of Churches meeting in La Paz. Since then, we have stayed in close touch, sharing moments during World Council of Churches Assemblies and also as members of the Latin American regional group of CER (Compartir Ecumênico de Recursos – *Ecumenical Sharing of Resources*) during and since its transition to the Ecumenical Forum of Brazil (FE Brasil) and in FE South America; on the Board of CLAI Brazil; and in the strong



partnership between CESE and Koinonia where Anivaldo works. Fellowship within this ecumenical movement is a constant source of strength and renewal in our deep commitment to a world of justice and peace.

In September 2008, my final judgment by the Amnesty Commission of the Ministry of Justice of Brazil was declared in a public ceremony in the offices of the National Council of Bishops of Brazil. I received an official pardon and, with great happiness, heard my daughter say that she was now, at last, able to be a Brazilian.

Through this public act of repatriation, today we celebrate the return to Brazil of all documentation held in the archives of the World Council of Churches, to be preserved in the archives of the Memory Commission of the Ministry of Justice and open to the public.

However, we must go further by creating a Memory and Truth Commission and calling for the archives of the dictatorship to be made public, for crimes committed by the military regime to be investigated and for perpetrators to be punished. We are also calling for the remains of those who disappeared to be returned to their families so they can be buried with dignity.

In closing, I want to acknowledge the opportunity given to me some 28 years ago by CESE and its founding churches: the opportunity to support social movements in their struggle to ensure all rights of all citizens—civic, political, economic, social, and cultural rights and, together, to build a society where democracy and justice for all prevail.

Thank you. Obrigada.  
*Translation by Kathleen Stephenson*  
August 2011

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Visit our global partnership photo site (<http://unitedchurch.smugmug.com/Brazil>) to see Kathleen's photos.

**Kathleen Stephenson** is a United Church of Canada overseas personnel serving with Coordenadoria Ecumenico de Servico in Brazil. The work of this ecumenical partner and the work of overseas personnel are made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.

