

A Forest of Memory: From the Streets and Parks in the UK to the New Forest in Curacuatín-Chile

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During the pandemic I went for a walk and reached the park at the Imperial War Museum, and although I had been to the Museum before, I have never walked in the Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park surrounding it. To my surprise I found two beautiful ‘Araucarias’, native trees of southern Chile. Beside one of them there was a plinth with a plaque dedicated to Jacqueline Drouilly, with the other plinth for Marcelo Salinas, Jacqueline’s partner, who was missing. As it turned out, these two trees had been planted as part of the Ecomemoria project. Since then, I have learned more about the project ‘[Ecomemoria](#)’ and I was lucky that Estela, one of the project’s founders, had an exhibition of the tree plantations with the most beautiful photographs of the occasions, an exhibition which has now been donated to the Documenting Chile Archive at the Living Refugee Archive, UEL.

The Ecomemoria project was set up in the aftermath of Pinochet’s arrest in London. The Chilean dictator was arrested on 16 October 1998 and remained under house arrest for 503 days while the judiciary and Home Office deliberated his extradition to Spain. Jack Straw concluded, following a questionable medical report by the unknown neurologist M. White (challenged by Dr Patel and colleagues of the Colleague of Neurologists), that Pinochet was not fit to face trial and sent him back home. Back at the airport in Chile, the ‘too ill to stand trial’ Pinochet stood up in triumph.

It was against this backdrop that [Memoria Viva /Human Rights International Project](#), together with other Chileans, set up ‘Ecomemoria’ in 2000.

This project responded to the combination of two man-made tragedies: the ‘disappearance of people’ and the ‘disappearance of the forests’ in Chile, both acts of extermination by the civic-military dictatorship. Although it was initially thought of as local project, it is was an idea that resonated all over the world. The members of Ecomemoria campaigned tirelessly and collected funds and began planting trees in a number of cities/places in the UK. The first tree was planted in Oxford for Diana Frida Arón Svigilisky and the group then went on to planting trees in other places in the UK. In London, the two Araucarias at the Imperial Museum were followed by the planting of trees in Lambeth Road and Sanctuary Street.

The work of Ecomemoria in phase one of the project-UK, in 2000, consisted specifically in planting a tree for each ‘Disappeared’ and politically executed person. Each tree with its plaque was to be a testament to countering these events anywhere and at any point in time. The initial manifesto declared: ‘Through this symbolic union- ecology and memory- a ‘living memory’ will be created in homage and stand as a testimony of denunciation to future generations.’ Included in the manifesto was also a quote from President Salvador Allende (11 September 1973): ‘I am

certain that the seeds which we have planted in the good conscience of thousands and thousands of Chileans will not be shrivelled forever.’

Today, they have started the phase two of the project in Chile, planting trees in Curacautín, south of Chile, whereby using the funds collected during phase one, they were able to buy land and have started planting a forest. So far, they have planted over a thousand trees and the forest is growing. The members’ concern now is that to keep the forest alive together with the memory of the executed and disappeared they need funds, lots of funds, ideally a permanent source of income to upkeep the forest.

They are making a heartfelt appeal to all of us to ‘adopt a tree’ or make a donation to Ecomemoria: **‘Each native tree in this forest, remembers one of the victims of the dictatorship’** and we can be part of this memory tree extending its branches all over the world. For further and detailed information, please, visit <https://ecomemoria.cl/>