

Racing time to save Carmen: An interview with Christian Labelle

In June 2016, CMHR Curator Armando Perla conducted an interview with Christian Labelle, who was working at the Canadian Embassy in Chile in 1986. Labelle describes the dramatic events surrounding the transport of burn-victim Carmen Gloria Quintana from Chile to Canada for medical treatment, and refuge for her family. Quintana, an 18-year-old student, had been doused with gasoline and set on fire by soldiers for protesting against the Pinochet dictatorship. Labelle negotiated her removal amid risk of retribution against “an inconvenient witness” and raced through the streets of Santiago to get her safely to the airport.

This transcription of the interview has been translated from the original French.

Interviewer: So I just have a few questions for you to try to really understand the story behind what happened with Carmen and the *arpilleras* (colourful patchwork images on cloth depicting scenes from daily life; made during the military dictatorship in Chile) and so forth.

Christian Labelle: Yes, that’s fine.

Interviewer: Could you tell how you came to work in Chile?



1986 passport photo of Christian Labelle

Christian Labelle: I was a Foreign Service officer in the immigration sector. As a member of the Foreign Service, virtually all of my career has been spent in various countries abroad. In 1986, I was posted to Santiago as Immigration Program Director at the Embassy of Canada in Santiago. And that’s how I ended up involved in Carmen’s case or situation.

Would you like me to give more details about that or do you have other questions?

Interviewer: Yes, I have another question related to that. I wondered if you could tell me more about the political situation in Chile when you arrived there.

Christian Labelle: In 1986, it was 13 years after the coup d’état had taken place in Chile and the country had gone through a fairly difficult economic time. By 1986, the economic situation had settled, but the social situation was still highly volatile. At that time, the government of General Pinochet - the military regime - had indicated that it intended to gradually return to democracy.

During my posting there, they also held a referendum in which Pinochet was asking to remain in power for another 10 years. And as you know, he lost that referendum in 1989. But when I arrived, as I said, the economic situation had stabilized. However, the social situation was still quite explosive, because there were regular demonstrations; probably not as many as in previous years, but I am not as familiar with the earlier years.

Interviewer: So at that time, what was Canada’s role in Chile?

Christian Labelle: Canada had normal diplomatic relations with Chile, as it did with all of the countries in the region. Canada had commercial interests in the country, given that Canadian companies, primarily in the mining sector, were working in Chile, so it was generally a normal situation.

Nevertheless, Canada was closely monitoring the political situation, given that after the coup d'état, Canada had opened its doors to thousands of refugees, including political prisoners. Some people had sought refuge at the Embassy immediately following the coup, and they had obtained safe-conduct passes to leave the country and come to Canada.

For a time we had what was called the program for political prisoners and oppressed persons, which allowed us to accept people who were in a vulnerable situation in Chile to go to Canada. So that program allowed us to accept people who were still in their own country to come to Canada, because according to the United Nations definition of refugees, a refugee is someone who has fled their country and has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of political opinion, race or membership in a particular social group, and cannot or chooses not to seek protection in their own country or return to it. So we typically select international refugees based on this United Nations definition of the term.

Interviewer: Yes... and how did you find out about what had happened to Carmen?

Christian Labelle: So, I arrived in Santiago on July 4, 1986 and the incident with Carmen occurred two days earlier, on July 2. I arrived with my wife, who also worked at the Embassy. She was the Ambassador's assistant and we arrived on the weekend, on a Saturday.



On Sunday, I was reading the newspaper and I saw something about the *quemados* (the burned ones). I didn't really know what it meant, given that my Spanish at the time was pretty limited. I understood that someone had been burned, but I didn't really know what it was about.

The next day, my first day of work at the Embassy, in the morning, I met with the employees in my section for the first time, and I was given a message from the office of the Canadian Immigration Minister at the time, asking me to make arrangements so that the two young people who had been burned by soldiers could be brought to Canada and treated at Montreal's Hôpital Hôtel-Dieu's burn unit.

I began to understand a bit more about what had happened, but I really didn't have any information. So we contacted the Vicaria de la Solidaridad, which was a Catholic human rights' organization in Santiago connected with the archdiocese. We typically dealt with this organization when there were people in trouble who needed protection by relocating them to Canada.

So given that it was the first time that I had heard about it, we wanted more details, and we contacted the executive secretary, Enrique Palet, and Alejandro González, who was the legal services director. And they told us exactly what had happened and, through them, we were in touch with Carmen's family,

with her parents and her attending physician at the hospital. I can't remember the name of the hospital...it's in my notes somewhere. I think it was a public aid hospital or something like that, but I'm not sure.



So finally we were able to talk with the doctor who told us that Carmen was between life and death. They weren't sure if she was going to survive. She had severe burns to 63 per cent of her body; they were trying to make sure she survived and travel was out of the question for several weeks, even months. Treatment was focused on her survival, and they would see what happened.

That was how things stood. But we still had to make the arrangements so that she could leave the country with no problems. The next step was for me to go and meet with

the director of consular affairs at the Chilean Foreign Affairs Ministry to tell him that Canada was offering to bring Carmen to Canada so that she could be treated in a hospital with a specialized burn unit.

Finally, he gave a diplomatic response that ultimately meant that he didn't object. He simply said that we thought it was a terrible situation for that poor girl and he thanked Canada for its offer and generosity.

So that's how it happened, and we knew that there was no objection from the Chilean government to her leaving the country. But the context at that time was that, when the news about the incident got out, there was widespread global condemnation of the Pinochet military regime. It was seen as an incredible act of cruelty. And, you know, there was a great deal of criticism and condemnation of the Chilean regime at that time. So we were worried, in that particular context and in the light of that reaction, that Carmen's life would probably be in greater danger.

I don't know if you remember, but two people were burned: Carmen and her friend, Rodrigo Rojas. So the Vicaría told us that Rodrigo Rojas had dual Chilean and American citizenship, and that the U.S. Embassy was handling his case. Unfortunately, he died two or three days later. He didn't survive and succumbed to his injuries. So there was just Carmen, and we made the arrangements so that she could come to Canada.

There were a lot of logistical or practical details... I told you about obtaining, not the authorization but the assurance that the Chilean government had no objection to her coming to Canada. The Vicaría also told us that it feared a great deal for her safety, and had arranged for there to be people at the hospital, on the same floor like a surveillance system. People were set up there to ensure that no-one came to attack or kill Carmen because the more international condemnation increased, the greater the risk for Carmen given that people might think they [the regime] would want to get rid of an inconvenient witness.

So the Vicaría told us that some people had arranged to take turns so that there was always someone near Carmen's door, so that no-one could get to her while she was being treated at the hospital. There was always the underlying issue of security, which was an ongoing concern for us because we were afraid that someone might try to attack her.

In terms of organizing the logistics for her departure so that she could leave the country, we made arrangements with Canadian airlines, which had a direct flight from Santiago to Toronto. It was called Canadian Pacific then, and we met with the flight director and made the arrangements with them. Transporting Carmen on a stretcher in the plane would require a total of nine plane seats. They had to put down the backs of three rows of seats to accommodate the entire stretcher length. So we had to purchase nine plane seats to have room to transport her.

The airline was accommodating, and told us that they would only charge us for three seats, including the seat for the attending physician travelling with her who would use one of the seats in the three rows. So Carmen's stretcher was placed along the windows and the doctor sat right beside her in the aisle seat.

With the transportation issue settled, there was also the issue of the exit formalities. So I met with the airport police director, and it was quite touching. I remember that memorable meeting. When I told him why I wanted to meet with him, that it was to facilitate Carmen's departure formalities, he got tears in his eyes and said that he had a daughter the same age as Carmen. He said that he couldn't imagine a child suffering like that and went on to assure me of his full cooperation. He said that everything would be fine; he gave me his guarantee. So that settled the official side of leaving the airport.

We waited to hear how Carmen's condition was progressing; at one point, it was feared that she wouldn't survive. She developed sepsis, and the doctor gave her antibiotic treatment, but he wasn't sure it would work. So for a few days, we were really very concerned about her survival, but she finally came out of it.

Her condition gradually improved. As I said, I arrived in early July and it was now the end of August. We began to finalize the arrangements for her departure. The doctor told us that she could travel by early September, so it was a day-to-day waiting game.

We finally set a date. She was scheduled to leave on September 11... Wait, let me check my notes... No, her departure was slated for September 9, but on September 5, there was an assassination attempt against General Pinochet. It happened on Sunday, September 5, in the Cajón del Maipo canyon. Did you hear about it?

Interviewer: Yes, yes I did.

Christian Labelle: OK, so you know about it. So what happened is that General Pinochet always travelled in a convoy of armoured Mercedes vehicles. There were five Mercedes in the motorcade, and he never travelled in the same vehicle. It might be the first, the second, the fifth, or the third. Each time he travelled, he was always in a different car.

The group was called the Patriotic Front of Manuel Rodríguez, the FPMR. They fired five rockets into the motorcade. Three exploded, instantly killing the passengers, and two didn't go off. Pinochet was in one of the two cars where the rockets didn't explode. He only sustained minor injuries to his hand.

But the security service's reaction was swift and brutal. They were, as we say, extremely effective. In just a few hours, they tracked down one of the cars used for the ambush and used the information to find the people who had organized the attack.

The next morning, when I arrived at the Embassy, my colleague was waiting for me; she was very angry, and said "It's César." So I said, "What's César? What do you mean?" And she showed me the first page of the *El Mercurio* newspaper, which said that the brains or the person behind the ambush was an employee of the Canadian Embassy.

So then I understand when she said it was César because she was talking about César Bunster who was involved in organizing that attack. He was one of our former employees. We had actually hired him just a few weeks after I arrived to replace the doorman we had at the Embassy. The Embassy was located in an office tower. We were on the 10th floor, and when people got out of the elevator, there was a kind of lobby with a doorman. Our only security was a metal gate that he would slide to let people in one at a time after checking their identification.

So our porter had resigned without notice, and we needed someone to replace him. Two people were referred to us, and César Bunster spoke excellent English. The other person only spoke Spanish. So we ended up hiring him (Bunster). We needed someone right away. So I would say he worked for around 10 to 12 days and then one day, he simply didn't show up for work. He told my colleague that he was having problems and couldn't come back to work. So we were in the same situation as before. We didn't make much of it until we found out that he had been involved in the assassination attempt against Pinochet.

What we found out later was that the last day he worked for us, he had asked the Embassy's administration department for a letter confirming that he had worked there, saying that he needed it to open a bank account. It seemed completely legitimate. He got his letter and then he disappeared. He used that letter to rent the cars. There were four or five cars and the house from which they planned their attack. So overnight he became the most wanted person, I believe, in Chilean history. He was wanted dead or alive.

But that put us in an extremely uncomfortable position, given that Carmen was scheduled to travel in the next few days, and as I just said, the Chilean security service was extremely swift and brutal. In the night following the assassination attempt, five people were killed by the CNI, the national intelligence agency or secret police, or something like that.

There was a journalist named José Carrasco. There were other people...I can't remember. I saw the names at some point, but I don't remember. But I remember the journalist because his wife was in our office the next day. She had a sister in Canada and wanted to meet up with her there; it was a really exceptional situation. Within 24 hours, she had all the papers she needed from us to leave for Canada.

But getting back to Carmen's situation... we were extremely worried. We realized that there was a link between the assassination attempt and the Canadian Embassy and we wanted Carmen to be able to travel, and now we felt that would be practically impossible. We consulted each other and headquarters. We finally decided that it would be preferable to have her leave as scheduled on September 9.

So there was the entire security issue in the background, and even the foreground, due to the circumstances. So we thought, given my diplomatic status – Chile is a country that has maintained fairly serious respect of diplomatic traditions – we believed that if we accompanied Carmen to the plane, we would considerably reduce the risks of attempts on her life enroute.

I couldn't travel in the ambulance with Carmen. There wasn't enough room. We therefore agreed that I would follow the ambulance with my own car to ensure there was a diplomatic presence near her, in the hopes that it would be enough to prevent anyone from attacking her.

We wondered whether we could use an embassy car with a driver, but we decided that it would be better if I used my own car. We wanted to be absolutely sure that there would be no risk of someone trying to slip between my car and the ambulance. If I was separated, the protection that could have been offered by my presence would have been eliminated.

The day of the departure, Carmen's family, her brothers and sisters and baggage and everything got to the airport separately on a "Micro" bus that people from the community had rented for them. I had Carmen's mother in my car as well as her aunt, who didn't want to go to Canada but rather to accompany her to the airport and say her goodbyes.

So I had those people in my car, and the instructions were that I was to follow the ambulance as closely as possible, because we absolutely had to prevent any other car from slipping in between mine and the ambulance. We left the hospital yard and the ambulance raced through the streets of Santiago with its siren blaring. We drove at over 100 km/hour through the city. I had to stay as close as possible and there were often cars that tried to get in between us. Each time a car approached, I would move in closer.



Sometimes I was barely a metre away from the ambulance, going 100 km/hour – I felt like a Formula 1 race car driver. I was really gripping the steering wheel.

Finally, we managed to cross the city and arrived at the airport. There, as agreed, we entered with the cars through a gate at the side of the airport field, and drove directly to the plane where there were airport service police officers waiting for us, and we handed them the papers. Four young and sturdy police officers took the stretcher and carefully guided it into the plane, trying not to

jostle Carmen. They put it in the right place inside the plane, and the exit stamps had previously been prepared for Carmen. The rest of her family were already on board with their paperwork completed.

Once she was installed, I wished her family good luck and said goodbye to them and Dr. Villegas who was accompanying her for the trip and to inform the doctors treating her at the Hôpital Hôtel-Dieu in Montreal so that everything was clear and they would have all the appropriate information to continue Carmen's treatment.

Oh yes, they also told me that a few other countries had offered to take Carmen, but they would only take her and her mother. But we felt that didn't really make any sense. First, she needed to have her loved ones, her family, close to her for her physical and psychological recovery. She had experienced unbelievable trauma. And we felt that if we left the rest of her family in Chile, they would be very vulnerable. Especially afterward, knowing how those actions of the government had been condemned internationally, we were sure that if the rest of her family was there, they would always risk retaliation or could even be killed.

So that's why we decided to take the whole family to Canada. Once everyone was settled in the plane, I went down and the plane took off, and I stayed at the airport until I couldn't see it anymore...until it was just a dot in the sky. I wanted to be sure that nothing happened and that the plane didn't come back or something like that. I needed to be sure she was really on her way to Canada.

Later, I saw Carmen once in Chile, two years later, in 1989. It was in April. Pope Jean-Paul II was making an official visit to Chile, and she wanted to meet him, so she returned to Chile and the Pope met with her. She came to the Embassy to see me and thank me for what we had done to help her get to Canada. I didn't know at that time that she had decided to stay in Chile. She had returned to Chile to live. She wanted to participate in the "No" campaign for the upcoming referendum, but I didn't hear anything more about her after that.

Well, I heard a bit, but I didn't have any direct contact with her until the summer of 2015, when I read an article in the *La Presse* newspaper that she was in Canada and that she was involved with the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Chile and that she also had been appointed Scientific Attaché at the Embassy of Chile in Canada and was working on her PhD in Psychology in Montreal.

So I decided to write to the journalist, saying in a few words that I had played a role in Carmen's coming to Canada, and that I would really like to be in touch with her. I provided my contact information so that she could give it to Carmen, and she could decide whether she wanted to see me.

Carmen sent me a message a few days later, and we agreed to meet here in Ottawa. So I met her in mid-July with her husband. We had lunch together and I told her some of what I just told you, and she hadn't been aware of any of it. It was at that meeting that I gave her the two *arpilleras*, those depictions...but I think you have them with you.

One *arpillera* shows her in front of the Hospital del Trabajador (workers' hospital), and the other shows the plane leaving for Canada. The *arpilleras* were given to me by the Vicaría a few months later as a

testimonial to thank us for the work we did to bring Carmen to Canada. I kept them all these years, all these years. And given that I was going to see her, I decided that she was the most appropriate person to have those pieces, which I consider to be works of art.

I was told that they were created by the people in Nogales, Carmen's neighbourhood, and given to La Vicaría so that they could give them to her.

Interviewer: The people from where?

Christian Labelle: The people from the neighbourhood where Carmen and her family lived.

Interviewer: Yes, but what's it called?

Christian Labelle: Nogales

Interviewer: Ah, Nogales... Ok.

Christian Labelle: So that's how she came to be in the possession of those two articles, which in my view are wonderful pieces of Chilean craftsmanship. I believe they are works of art because they were made by people to depict different scenes of everyday life in Chile. In this case, they clearly represent Carmen's situation shortly before her departure from Chile, and just as she was leaving.

So that's how Carmen received these two *arpilleras*, which she ultimately decided to donate to the museum to be included in the exhibition. We are delighted with her decision, because it is another element that illustrates a bit of what happened, and it also has an historical aspect.

Interviewer: I have one more question now, because you mentioned the international condemnation of what happened, but what prompted Canada to bring Carmen here for treatment?

Christian Labelle: The motivation was purely humanitarian. There were many demonstrations here in Canada, and people said that it was horrible that a military regime could do that to its own citizens. She was injured and in a really difficult situation. Canada has the scientific knowledge and expertise to treat people with severe burns, so the motivation was purely humanitarian.

And we also had a sizeable Chilean community here [in Canada] at that time, and I'm sure that that community demonstrated to demand that Canada do something, but it all happened very quickly, only three or four days after the incident in which Carmen and her friend were burned. So I think the Minister of Immigration, as soon as he found out, immediately made the decision to bring her to Canada.

Yes, Canada's solidarity with Chile was really outstanding at that time, wasn't it?

And we had taken in several thousand Chileans following the coup d'état. I don't know exactly how it happened here [in Canada], because I had just arrived in Chile. I had gone on vacation beforehand, and left Canada three weeks earlier. I wasn't here when the events took place, and I wasn't aware of what

happened here in Canada and what prompted the Minister to ask us to bring her here. However, I'm convinced that the Chilean community demonstrated as soon as it found out about the incident.

Interviewer: How old were you at the time?

Christian Labelle: Let's see... I was 38, I think.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that we didn't discuss that you think is important to mention or talk about?

Christian Labelle: Wait...Let me think...I don't think so... Well, I saw Carmen again, but I also saw her family who settled here. Because I had dealt mostly with her parents, I expressed the desire to see them again, and Carmen arranged a lunch a few weeks later. I was able to meet her father and mother, as well as her three sisters who are all living in Canada.

I learned how things had been for them and about their integration and the problems they had experienced. It wasn't easy for them. First, they had to learn the language, and you can imagine suddenly being in that situation without any preparation, being uprooted and taken to another country with a completely different culture, language and climate. They did receive some support from Montreal's Chilean community when they arrived, but after a while, they had to fend for themselves.

So it was a difficult transition. But now they are part of our society. One of the sisters even speaks with a Quebecois accent. I would never guess she is of Chilean origin. It was a lovely meeting, very warm. Carmen's parents were really happy to see me again, and I felt the same way.

For me, it was probably the most impactful experience in my career.

Interviewer: Did what happened to Carmen have an impact in Chile after she left? Did she motivate people to continue with their demonstrations and protests?

Christian Labelle: Well, her case came up in the news on a regular basis, especially when something happened abroad that brought what happened to her to the forefront. There were probably demonstrations related to her situation, but I can't recall anything specific.

Interviewer: Ok, ok. And you, are you from Montreal?

Christian Labelle: Yes, I'm from Montreal.

Interviewer: Well, I think those are all the questions I have for you for now.