

A Modicum of Justice for Ronni Karpen Moffitt

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Fifty years after Pinochet's henchmen assassinated her and Orlando Letelier, finally a judicial reckoning.



A monument to Orlando Letelier and Ronni Karpen Moffitt, who were killed by agents of the Chilean secret police in 1976, in Washington, DC.(Peter Kornbluh)

At Sheridan Circle on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, DC, a small monument marks the spot where former Chilean ambassador Orlando Letelier and his young colleague Ronni Karpen Moffitt were killed by a car bomb planted by agents of the Chilean secret police on the morning of September 21, 1976. The monument is inscribed with the words “Justice – Peace – Dignity”; every year dozens of friends and colleagues gather at the circle to honor the lives

of the two extraordinary people whose conscientious pursuit of those goals were cut short by an act of international terrorism.

This September, the annual gathering will carry a special meaning—and not only because it is the 50th anniversary of the assassination. It comes after a Chilean judge has called new attention to the case of Ronni Karpen Moffitt, finalizing a 15-year judicial effort to bring long-overdue accountability for her death as a victim of the Pinochet regime's ruthless repression, rather than as collateral damage in the regime's effort to eliminate its leading international critic, Orlando Letelier. Fifty years after she was murdered, there is finally a degree of justice for Ronni Moffitt, and a significant step toward closure in the infamous Letelier-Moffitt case.

The Long Arc of Justice

Ronni Susan Karpen Moffitt was just 25 years old when a piece of shrapnel from the car bomb cut through her neck, as she and her husband, Michael, were commuting to work at the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) with Orlando Letelier that fall morning 50 years ago. A Jersey girl—she was the daughter of Murray and Hilda Karpen, proud owners of Karpen's Delicatessen in Passaic, where I once enjoyed a delicious knish—she had just been promoted to a fundraising position at IPS where she worked closely with cofounders Marcus Raskin and Richard Barnet. "Everyone loved Ronni, who used to babysit for me and my siblings," Representative Jamie Raskin fondly remembered during a special ceremony at Sheridan Circle in 2023.

"My Aunt Ronni was music," as her niece Rebecca Karpen recalled the highlights of her short life in an interview with *The Nation*. "She wanted to create an after-school music program for low-income kids of color. She got married in the backyard of her parents' home in Passaic, New Jersey, where she walked down the aisle in a flower crown and posed inside the family deli food truck. She was kind, but not weak. She was just confident of her worth and unwilling to shrink herself to conform to outdated stereotypes of women's roles in the workplace. I've been told that she didn't take anyone's shit!"

"Ronni lost her life because the dictatorship decided to exterminate those it defined as enemies," notes Dr. Elizabeth Lira, who directs the Human Rights Center of the Alberto Hurtado University in Santiago, Chile. Indeed, Ronni was not the target of the assassination plot; her outspoken Chilean colleague Orlando Letelier was. The FBI investigation, codenamed "CHILBOM," soon focused on the Chilean secret police, DINA, which served as Gen. Augusto Pinochet's arm of repression both inside and outside of Chile, targeting pro-democracy opponents of the military dictatorship.

Eventually, the FBI identified two DINA operatives, American-born Michael Townley and Maj. Armando Fernandez Larios, as leading suspects. The US then sought the extradition of

DINA's top two officers, Manuel Contreras and his deputy Pedro Espinoza—which General Pinochet personally blocked. A comprehensive CIA review of its own intelligence on the car bombing concluded that there was “convincing evidence that President Pinochet personally ordered his intelligence chief to carry out the murder” and that Pinochet “decided to stonewall on the case to hide his involvement and, ultimately, to protect his hold on the presidency.”

When Chile finally returned to democracy in 1990, the George H.W. Bush administration made a deal with the incoming civilian government: The US would drop sanctions against Chile for protecting the DINA officers if the new government prosecuted Contreras and Espinoza. That unprecedented trial—the first of its kind in post-Pinochet Chile—became the Chilean equivalent of the O.J. Simpson trial in the United States. For most Chileans, the nationally televised legal proceedings provided their first exposure to the true nature of the Pinochet regime's sinister system of repression—and flagrant acts of international terrorism.

Contreras and Espinoza were both found guilty of conspiring to assassinate Orlando Letelier; and given inexplicably short prison sentences of seven and six years respectively—to be served in Punta Peuco, a special luxury prison built just for them. But Pinochet, still the powerful head of the Chilean Army, remained untouchable—along with all the other torturers and executioners from his ruthless 17-year dictatorship.

Only after Pinochet's historic October 1998 arrest in London under the European Anti-Terrorism Convention was his immunity from accountability broken. Although the British ultimately released him after over a year of house arrest, within 72 hours of his return to Santiago, a courageous judge, Juan Guzman, filed papers in court to strip Pinochet of his immunity from prosecution. At the time he died at age 91 on December 10, 2006—ironically, International Human Rights Day—the former dictator faced at least half a dozen indictments and investigations for corruption and human rights atrocities.

In June 2011, a leading human rights group called the Agrupacion de Familiares de Ejecutados Politicos—the Association of Relatives of Politically Executed Persons—filed legal complaints on behalf of over 1,000 murder victims of the Pinochet regime whose cases had never been specifically adjudicated. The case of Ronni Moffitt was one of them. In 2012, a Chilean court formally ordered that her case be officially investigated. A lengthy investigation over the next 14 years ensued, with depositions and documents filling massive volumes of evidence. On June 15, 2026, Chile's special magistrate for human rights, Judge Paola Plaza, finally issued her verdict.

In her 138-page ruling, Judge Plaza found three former high officials of the Chilean secret police, DINA, guilty for killing Moffitt. Brig. Gen. Pedro Espinoza, DINA's former deputy director for operations, was sentenced to 15 years; Gen. Raul Iturriaga, a high-ranking officer

in DINA's "Exterior" department, was also sentenced to 15 years, as was retired Brig. Gen. José Zara Holger, also a director in DINA's international operations division.

Espinoza has been incarcerated for decades for his high-level role in DINA's criminal repression. Iturriaga, now 88 years old, is currently serving cumulative sentences of 500 years for his human rights crimes. But Zara was released in August 2025 after completing his sentence of 15 years for his role in the car bomb assassination of Chilean Gen. Carlos Prats and his wife, Sofia Cuthbert, in Buenos Aires in September 1975—a DINA operation that set a precedent for the Letelier-Moffitt attack. Less than a day after he left Punta Peuco—the special prison built for military officers convicted of human rights crimes—Judge Plaza ordered that Zara be rearrested as a co-conspirator in the Letelier-Moffitt assassination.

The Meaning of the Moffitt-Letelier Case

Fifty years after the assassination, the Moffitt ruling becomes part of the final chapter in the long legal effort to hold General Pinochet and his DINA henchmen accountable for an act of international terrorism in Washington, DC. Just this past week *The New York Times* [published](#) an exposé on ICE's detention—and then release—of one of those henchman, Armando Fernandez Larios, who defected to the United States in 1987, and served all of five months in prison for his role in the assassination plot. Last October, in its quest to find immigrants with real criminal backgrounds, ICE detained Fernandez Larios; the Department of Homeland Security labeled him "the worst of the worst" for his past crimes of homicide. But after he [filed](#) a "wrongful detention" lawsuit against ICE, he was quietly freed from the Krome Detention Center in Miami on March 19. Whether he will ever be deported, as so many immigrants with no criminal backgrounds have been, remains to be seen.

But both the Fernandez Larios case, and the recent ruling in the case of Ronni Moffitt have returned international attention to this atrocity, committed a half-century ago. Indeed, the pursuit of justice, peace, and dignity has never really stopped. For five long decades, the Letelier and Moffitt families, IPS (where they were employed), and human rights advocates in both the United States and Chile have successfully kept Ronni Karpen Moffitt and Orlando Letelier in the public spotlight, sustaining pressure on the authorities in both countries to hold those who killed them accountable.

Those persevering efforts have transformed Sheridan Circle into hallowed ground. It is no longer only the place where an infamous act of international terrorism took the lives of two beautiful people; it is now a place of community dedication to the sanctity of human rights. "We are gathered here because the military dictatorship that took power 50 years ago tried to put its bloody mark on this spot," [Sarah Anderson](#), an IPS director, told those attending the annual commemoration in September 2023. "But we have taken it back."

“We have turned this site of the assassination of Orlando Letelier and Ronni Karpen Moffitt into our place,” she said. “Our place for remembering our fallen heroes, a place for renewing our commitment to justice and democracy. And a place of hope.”

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