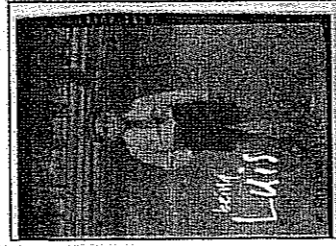


BOOKS

Capturing the spirit

► Luis Munoz endured a childhood filled with illness and pain which served in some ways as a preparation for the torture he would endure in a Chilean death camp in the 1970s. His fascinating memoirs offer an insight into an era blanked out of history books by 'official amnesia'. By **Michael McCaughan**



Being Luis: a Chilean life
By Luis Munoz
Impress Books,
released July 1
£11.99

This gripping memoir grabs hold of the reader when Luis Munoz, a Chilean revolutionary, is captured by torture addicts determined to crush body and soul. "The world so far had been one with values, morals and principles that seemed to have been in place for ever," recalls Luis. Now the world consisted of a dark hood, electrodes on his privates and hammer blows raining down on his body day and night. His captors grew desperate as he refused to give any information, so they threatened to bring his three year old daughter to suffer in front of him. "Bring her," he said, a phrase which would torment him long after the physical scars had healed.

The author was a Chilean revolutionary who came of age in the 1960s, an era in which young people not only demanded the impossible, but set about making it happen within their lifetime. The rise of Salvador Allende, a democratic Marxist elected to power in 1970, opened the doorway to radical reform. The extreme left criticised Allende for moving too slowly against the ruling class, while the extreme right sought to oust him from power, fearing the erosion of long-standing privileges. The US, kingmaker in the region, organized and funded a coup d'état led by Gen Augusto Pinochet which murdered 3,000 people and silenced a generation.

Munoz was a member of an armed left wing group, MIR, which anticipated the bloody showdown but proved helpless to prevent it.

However, this book is much more than a retelling of the Chilean tragedy which followed the Latin American pattern of mass repression followed by official amnesia. The author, a survivor of Pinochet's death camps, offers an intimate portrait of a human being taken to the limits of sanity and his subsequent efforts to understand the crazed minds who destroyed his life.

Despite the grim nature of this dominant



(MOTOR ROYALS/AFP VIA THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Supporters of former Chilean President Salvador Allende, who died in a bloody American-supported coup in 1973, take part in a demonstration to commemorate the 30th anniversary of his death

theme, Luis weaves a funny and hectic narrative around his childhood. His father, an ambitious entrepreneur, saw one money-making scheme after another bite the dust, taking the family from financial comfort to total misery. Luis was forced to abandon school and find work, beginning an odyssey of odd jobs which saw him and his brother eat rotting fruit to stave off hunger each day.

Luis hooked up with radical activists and secretly purchased a rucksack and boots on credit to join Che Guevara in Bolivia, a journey which had to be aborted when his family found out about it. The enthusiastic revolutionary dedicated every spare moment to the cause. One of the most entertaining episodes in the book is when young Luis received orders to find weapons for the organisation. He took up

residence as a mathematics student in a house adjacent to a gun shop. The plan was to study the habits of the people living in the house and leave as few clues as possible to his identity. But Luis can't tell the difference between a complex variable and a cappuccino, and his efforts to remain incognito are scuppered by the attention of an amorous daughter who plants herself in his bedroom and constantly sketches the phony student.

The research ended with an armed takeover of the house in which Luis' plot was uncovered just as his comrades burst through doors to empty the armory next door.

At first glance, Luis was an unlikely candidate for the tough path ahead; born with weak lungs, the family doctor sent the infant home to die with his mother, as young as two years of age and people as

However, his grandmothers, descended from shamans and healers, applied "carrots, red peppers, cow's blood, donkey's milk, lamb's liver" and a dozen more herbs to save the child's life. Fussed over round the clock, Luis still faced TB, mumps, measles and chickenpox in the years ahead, as if the world was grooming him for days of impending infinite pain.

When the coup d'état occurred in September 1973, Luis began a clandestine existence, shuffling from one safehouse to another as the corpses piled high in the streets outside. Luis refused to go into exile and when his wife was arrested, it became a matter of time before the noose tightened round his own neck.

Husbands were tortured in front of wives and wives in front of children - children as young as two years of age and people as