



# Santiago's Children: What I Learned about Life at an Orphanage in Chile

*Steve Reifenberg*

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Unclear about his future career path, Steve Reifenberg found himself in the early 1980s working at a small orphanage in a poor neighborhood in Santiago, Chile, where a determined single woman was trying to create a stable home for a dozen or so children who had been abandoned or abused. With little more than good intentions and very limited Spanish, the 23-year-old Reifenberg plunged into the life of the Hogar Domingo Savio, becoming a foster father to kids who stretched his capacities for compassion and understanding in ways he never could have imagined back in the United States.

In this beautifully written memoir, Reifenberg recalls his two years at the Hogar Domingo Savio. His vivid descriptions create indelible portraits of a dozen remarkable kids—mature-beyond-her-years Verónica; sullen, unresponsive Marcelo; and irrepressible toddler Andrés, among them. As Reifenberg learns more about the children's circumstances, he begins to see the bigger picture of life in Chile at a crucial moment in its history.

The early 1980s were a time of economic crisis and political uprising against the brutal military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Reifenberg skillfully interweaves the story of the orphanage with the broader national and international forces that dramatically impact the lives of the kids. By the end of *Santiago's Children*, Reifenberg has told an engrossing story not only of his own coming-of-age, but also of the courage and resilience of the poorest and most vulnerable residents of Latin America.

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