

Little Pieces of a Big Story

Roberta Bacic, Northern Ireland, February 2001

Time and distance allow me the perspective to share this story of common history with special affection. Now the core issues not only come through but become clearer, and, as the superfluous fades, and as time and the flow of the rivers take it away, it leaves only the deepest parts which make us people with history and memory. While I look out at the fields from this side of the world in a country house, remembrance and emotion bring me incredibly closer to the city of Osorno, located at the confluence of the Rahue and Damas rivers 565 miles south of Santiago, the capital of my country, Chile. And not only Osorno makes itself present, but also the little nearby towns of Entre Lagos, Río Negro, San Pablo, Puerto Octay, El Encanto, Puyehue and many others appearing among rivers, lakes, volcanoes, rural roads, clouds, hills, valleys, people walking, birds, oxcarts, tractors, cars and rickety rural buses. And in each one of these things I see the faces of the women and their families emerging; the people with whom at the beginning of the 1980s I went looking for their detained disappeared, searching for a better quality of life and living. The women had already started on the road. I had too, in other lands. By then we all had already carried the burden of almost ten years of harsh military dictatorship.

And so, wherever we are, amid song, poetry and tears, our memories become reality. With deep emotion, Peruvian Jose Maria Arguedas emerges with his book "The Deep Rivers", where the strength resides in being Indian, being mestizo from the earth itself. He lived and died in this intense and never-ending search. While gathering his writings for new editions, his Chilean wife Sibila was arrested in Lima and ever since lives as a political prisoner in the cells of a jail of that capital. She cannot imagine me thinking about her, but she identifies with us in our search; a search which is also hers and that of so many many others.

January 1999 brought me to my country, to be with mine and to search for bits of identity. When unable to reach each one of their faces we arrived at "La Chascona", the Santiago house of our poet Pablo Neruda, then we went to the port of Valparaiso, we climbed its hills and went inside his other house called "La Sebastiana" and from there I communicated with those who are absent, always present. Under the sun the deliberate and deep voice of Neruda reminded me of the relevance of our search, captured in his great work "Heights of Macchu Picchu":

*“ . . . I come to speak through your dead mouth,
through the earth gather all
the silent spilled lips
and from the deep speak to me throughout this long night
as if I were anchored to you . . . ”*

Isabel, Juanita, Sara, Uberlinda, Gloria, Zulema, Blanca, Marianela, Elvecia, Carmen, Sabina, María, Rosa, Dina, Lastenia, Jovita, Margarita, Genoveva, Angélica, Angela and all those whose names I cannot recall, I find you again through your words registered in the space that we built together. With what right do I share this? Dr. Fernando Oyarzun, companion of reflection, strolls and ethical questionings with whom long hours were shared since 1975 in the midst of the hasty university life in the Austral University of Valdivia, comes to mind. As a testimony to this path, I have received in the mail his last book, published in June 1998: “The normal and abnormal person and the anthropology of living together.” In it he points out:

“The face of the other person presents to me with meaning, with a certain way to communicate through which the person expresses in a lively way, through his/her body, the junction between many polar elements like: the psyche and the body (the joy of the smile, the bitterness in the gesture), the singular and the universal (what is unique as a contrast to what is universal), the world and the person (the other and oneself), what has been perceived and what has been imagined, etc.”

Meeting in a dark basement on Bilbao Street in Osorno, we shared the search, the daily experiences, the stories, the facts and the feelings, alongside the rage, the protests and the ways to confront injustice, impunity and ultimately to confront the dictatorship. In one of the many moments when we gathered together, out of our lived experience of the disappearance of a loved one, emerged an awareness, a realisation of what brings that experience to the limit of what is understandable, breaks through the limits of reason, overruns your feelings, and at the same time characterises the particular, unique relationship you had with the absent person.

Juanita used to say to us:

“I can't come to terms with the fact that I scolded him on the morning he was taken. I told him they were looking for him because he was too involved in politics and that that would bring us all problems. And he did not even have time for breakfast before they came for him. I will always have that awful feeling, that he left sad

because of the angry words of his mother and without her support and comfort... I don't even want to imagine how his last minutes must have been".

And Juanita, always soft and sweet - seeking comfort in the Protestant Church, wandering with the other women of the Association of Relatives of Detained Disappeared in search of her son and of justice, helping her neediest neighbours, cooking for her husband, her children and grandchildren - died in poverty in her house on a marginal street in Osorno. Not even in her final moments did she find complete peace, as uniformed men occupied part of the street where she lived and came close to the site of her wake. With that they did not allow the full mourning which she deserved and to which her relatives were entitled; the same right that had been totally denied to them with respect to her son. Juanita left with a smile, in spite of her immense sorrow, and with the new pair of black shoes we had just given her to cover her cold and tired feet during her untiring journey.

Carmen, a short, full-figured and gentle farmer who lived in a tiny house in one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Osorno, always came to the meetings with a little basket of home made bread or cookies for us. She would make this with special love and in solidarity shared her scarce means. At the time her son was detained, which she witnessed since he was taken from their own house, she lived in the country with her son Carlos and a young granddaughter. Carlos was a tractor driver at a large farm. She remembers she was told; *"We will take him to ask him a few questions and he will be back"*. She waited for him with an unlocked door for 18 years, his clothes always clean and ironed, leaving a meal ready for him every day just in case he showed up at night to avoid police patrols and, for the first few years, the state of siege. After five days of his detention the owners of the farm had forced her to leave the little house where they lived, and that's how she came to Osorno. With love she raised her granddaughter, who grew up to become a university student and secretary for the Association of Relatives of Detained Disappeared. In 1992 she came to a group meeting and came up to me to offer me bread as usual. When I thanked her, she told me *"I've been such a terrible mother"*. Her categorical tone surprised me and I could not help pointing out to her the reasons why I thought she was a fine mother. She let me take her to a corner of the room and then she told me her reasons. A few days before the meeting, and very recently after the first democratically elected government took office after the dictatorship; the National TV channel of Chile had shown a program about torture. In that context she pointed out:

“I was very selfish, always thinking that my son was being kept alive somewhere and that he would return at any moment. When I heard the testimony on torture I wished that my son would have died immediately, without having to suffer so much, because if he had survived he would have returned home already.”

Since then she no longer waits for him but she still demands his remains to be found so she can give them a proper Christian burial next to her husband. She died some months after this meeting.

The Leveque family, an old Osorno working class family of Mapuche origins, was very committed to the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende. Don Pedro had been one of the first members of the Communist Party and as such he always participated actively and publicly in the party. He had a great number of children and the oldest, Rodolfo, 21 at the time of the military coup, was married and had a baby boy (who today has almost finished his degree in Anthropology). They came looking for both, took both father and son, but also took Wladimir, who was disabled and younger than Rodolfo. Don Pedro survived three hard months of torture and detention, but Rodolfo and Wladimir did not; both are still Detained Disappeared. Uberlinda, wife of Pedro and mother of both disappeared was for years the president of the Association of Relatives of Detained Disappeared. She would make innumerable trips to Santiago representing her Osorno group, looking for her sons and seeking medical assistance since the search was, in her own words, “driving her mad”. In our meetings she would always repeat to us:

“I am so hurt by the taking of my children. It was clear to Rodolfo that they were looking for him because he was president of the Osorno Communist Youth. But Wladi, what wrong could he have done? He was handicapped, they did not let me get him his crutches and I despair when I think of him having to go to the bathroom if he could not move without them”.

Doña Ube, as we affectionately call her, stood by Don Pedro until his death a couple of years ago. She turned over the presidency of the association to her daughter in law Angelica, and she has not relented in the search for her sons, especially for her disabled son because:

“He needs me more, he only has me; Rodolfo has his wife and his son, who is a grown man already”.

In that same context I met Zulema, already elderly at the beginning of the 1980s. She always said that in the Association she was representing Jose, a disappeared nephew. She did it with great fervour when his own parents, two elderly Mapuche farmers, could not come. She always had the gift of leadership in spite of being illiterate, but in her own words:

“With a memory envied by social workers and the ability to know when to speak and when to be silent according to the circumstances”.

Several years later, the group was discussing a book by Patricia Politzer entitled “Fear In Chile”, which told the story of 10 people filled with fear who had either survived repression under extreme circumstances or had feared the Popular Unity government. Zulema said nothing but asked me to come over to her house. There, after her children were asleep, she told me this;

“I want nothing to do with that journalist, she takes advantage of people, she tells my daughter’s story and gets rich at our expense, and without knowing, she puts us at risk and does not even give us a copy of the book.”

I could not believe what I was hearing because I thought her only reason for being there was Jose. Zulema's daughter Blanca was the mayor of Entre Lagos who had been brought before a firing squad together with her husband and who survived that experience by falling into the Pilmaiquen river, swimming out, asking farmers from the area to help her by telling them she was escaping persecution from a husband who was after her with a knife. She managed to live clandestinely for years, protected by the *Vicaria de la Solidaridad* so no one would ever look for her again. Her children gave her up for dead together with their father. Zulema kept the secret tightly and was her link to everything and would bring her bits of history. A few days later I photocopied the chapter from the book that told the story of Blanca and brought it to Zulema’s house. We sat next to the fire drinking *mate*, I read her the story and left her the photocopy. We did not make any comments, but simply gave each other a hug and a kiss. I only saw her one more time before her death, two years later.

In 1992 I came to Temuco to live. Blanca, Zulema’s daughter, lives there. We have become close, we’ve shared enjoyable social moments at her home, I have helped her reclaim her rights as the wife of a detained disappeared. I have learned from her own lips

the pride that she feels for having been named mayor by Salvador Allende after beginning as a leader in a poor neighbourhood. I have also heard of some of her misadventures, of her lack of trust in human justice, of the fear she still feels, of the impotence and anger that fill her after having testified before Chilean and international tribunals about those responsible for her execution of her comrades and attempted execution of herself and to know that the guilty are still free and walk around the streets of our country like ordinary people. She is now, after years of militancy in the Communist Party, an active member of a Christian Church.

In the poor neighbourhoods of the small town of Entre Lagos live Jovita and her family, as well as Lastenia. Maria also lived there. Doña Blanca knew them all during her term as Mayor. Jovita was the sister of a detained disappeared who was executed next to her and her husband. Maria also lost her husband. Two summers ago I arranged a visit with Blanca to the place where the earlier events took place. She shared with her friends, enjoyed the friendship, was overcome by the memories and was enraged by the degree of poverty in which they live, much greater than when she was a public official. She visited the new Pilmaiquen bridge, walked on the old suspension bridge where she was shot together with other farmers, all still disappeared. She visited the monument we built in 1990 to remember the group, and in the words of Cuban singer Pablo Milanés, she *“stepped once again on the bloodied streets”*.

Lastenia is Mapuche, a poor farmer, a born social fighter, mother of four children. I met her in Osorno, generous with her sad smile, warm with her embrace, direct in her look and sharp in her truth. She always told the same story:

“It is not fair that the guilty are on the loose and no competent tribunal makes them tell us where they are.”

Every day she was angrier, she was incapable of talking about anything else. Her friends, in spite of respecting her, began getting impatient. One day we asked her why she repeated the story we already knew so many times. She replied that she knew who had taken part in the execution in Entre Lagos and she was supposed to be one of their victims. But there had been no more room in the vehicle, and when the policemen had returned drunk, one of them told her:

“Your mayor should save you now that she has been eaten by the crabs.”

There were no more executions, so Lastenia was saved. She thought no one would believe her version because of her poor background. We did a role-play of the events and the fact that we recognised her truth gave her later the courage to come before the appropriate the competent tribunal that she hoped for. She felt very relieved and later presented her testimony to one of the courts in Osorno. She feels she has done right by the missing, but she feels frustrated when she sees that the murderers are still walking freely through the streets of her town, knowing that her truth, no matter how true, has not affected them at all, that they enjoy total impunity.

On the road heading south from Osorno we find the small town of Río Negro. Isabel lives there, the wife of Mario, an outstanding regional athlete who was Regent for the Communist Party of his town. He was detained a few days after the coup and, unlike many detained disappeared, he was seen by his wife on several occasions while being held at the local stadium. She witnessed his health deteriorating and the last time she was able to see him he asked her not to hug him because his ribs were broken. The next time she came to the place they told her that he had been released and that surely he would be home any day. That did not happen. She waited and searched with her two children. She made numerous trips following clues as they were given to her. She even went to Santiago. Every time she saw a vagrant she would think it could be Mario because she thought that as a result of the torture, he might have been in bad shape and disoriented when they released him, and now could not find his way home. She raised her children in this context and with them she participated in the Association of Relatives of Detained Disappeared. Her children began to participate in politics as soon as the dictatorship was over. But the oldest, who is today a prominent professional in Puerto Montt, distanced himself from any involvement in public activity, disillusioned that the neoliberal model continued and its practices were tied to the military regime. The younger son still participates. Years later, guided by her spirit of solidarity and understanding the meaning of being abandoned by society, she adopted a baby girl who could not be raised by her mother. Viviana is 12 years old today and she is great company to Isabel. In this process of getting closer to the families and the commitment to their situations, I was asked to be the godmother of the little girl. It has been a beautiful experience to maintain a permanent closeness with them. For a few years now Isabel has been receiving a Reparations Pension granted by the state. The quality of life has improved for her as well as for other recipients, but Isabel has said:

“They only give me what I have a right to. With Mario we never lacked anything, but after these events we lived in misery and despised by all. Besides, there has

been no justice. That would be real reparation! I would not wish my fate on anyone. We have not even got a handful of bones. With just a few little bones we would feel at peace, the soul would return to our body. The way things are now we will forever live in doubt.”

A little bit further in from Río Negro, following a narrow dirt road in the middle of a beautiful countryside is Riachuelo, a small town of farm and forest laborers. The Barría-Bassay family lived there until three years ago when they moved to Osorno for health reasons and to be closer to their surviving children. A few days after the 1973 military coup, two of their sons aged 19 and 21 years old were arrested. The two young men were active members of the Socialist Party. They have been disappeared since then. The Barria-Bassays took charge of two children of the detainees and raised them as their own. A maternal grandmother raised another one of the children. They experienced very hard times. Fear and the social stigma were greater in small towns. Elvecia Bassay has maintained her affection and warmth in spite of all her hardships. I remember travelling to the Netherlands with big jars of homemade jam to bring to one of her brothers exiled there. I was surprised by her capacity to share in spite of her poverty and I was filled with happiness to see how her present was received. She has participated for years in the search for her children, contributing information and supporting each legal action. I was very moved by her words at the death of another of her sons in a car accident.

“This is terrible, to lose a child is the worst thing that can happen to a mother. It is against our nature. We are here to raise them and make men or women out of them. But to have a disappeared son is the worst, and we lost two. It cannot be understood, there can be no peace. I say that it would have been terrible to lose my husband, but somehow I would have managed. I am never going to rest, sometimes I think not even after death’.

These small stories are not meant to be the pieces of a puzzle. I simply share them with the hope to subtly unveil a window to worlds, life experiences and realities that are impossible to imagine without the living testimony of their protagonists. If the gift of the trust and friendship of these women, together with my pen begin to achieve that objective, I feel that the distances between us will have been narrowed and we will be closer to understanding.