Always from somewhere else: reflections on exile

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Fecha: May-June 1995
De: NACLA Report on the Americas(Vol. 28, Issue 6)
Editorial: Taylor & Francis Ltd.
Tipo de documento: Article
Extensión: 2.584 palabras

Resumen:
A Chilean writer narrates her exile to the US. Forced to silence by her inability to speak English, she used her letters and poetry to express her feelings of loneliness. Words became her ally and helped her reconstruct memories of a country which she called home. Through the years, she learned the power of words and use it to make other people see the situation in Chile. She has written several books, all of which allude to the fear and pain of living in exile.

Texto completo:
My father, Moises Agosin. whose very name evokes exodus, landed in Chile in 1926 aboard a fragile craft for refugees and dreamers. He was born in Marseilles, though his parents were Russian Jews who had fled the pogroms of Czar Nicholas. Exile, always being from somewhere else, feeling separate and different, is still an essential part of my history and my identity. My grandparents on my father's side spoke Russian, French and Turkish, since before Marseilles they had spent three years in Istanbul.

People say history moves in cycles, repeats itself, but it is also filled with mysterious chance occurrences, unforeseeable coincidences. My own exile was part of a family tradition linked to the vagabond fate of the Jewish people. I also suffered exile, but I didn't travel in a cargo ship across the Atlantic to the Pacific. We crossed vast expanses in a giant airplane that reminded me of a mischievous bird turning pirouettes in the sky. Back then, I was an adolescent who loved the Beatles, black clothes, Neruda's poetry and my country, Chile.

In 1974, one year after the military coup that overthrew President Salvador Allende, my parents decided to go into exile, to leave their country and our extended family in order to live in freedom. They left so that we would not have to attend universities controlled by the military or have to ask permission every time we wished to get together with more than three people at a time.

We left Chile one beautiful September day. The myrrhs, those lovely bushes of the Southern Hemisphere, were in bloom, yellow, like butterflies suspended in the air. I gazed nostalgically at the Andes, splendid and majestic, and I recalled that my mother's parents had crossed them by mule from the Argentine border. Now I joined them, joined that history of pilgrimage. This time not for being a Jew, but for being a socialist. Just as my grandparents arrived in Chile in search of political and religious refuge, my parents and brothers. nearly half a century later, abandoned that country which had opened its doors to so many immigrants during the two world wars.

Now we too were searching for the peace and freedom of expression all refugees long for, but with the difference that my parents belonged to an intellectual elite and we were headed for a powerful country: the United States. When I got there. I did not know how to speak English, and learning was a painful and lonely venture. My classmates in the public school of Athens. Georgia made fun of me. They called me "Jew" and "Latina." (In the early 1970s, multiculturalism was not yet in fashion.) I couldn't defend myself, or even speak at all. Though I had left behind the censors of my own country. I found myself silenced once again (in a democracy!). Since the United States was responsible for the military coup that overthrew the government of Salvador Allende. l felt as if I were living in the country that had betrayed my own. Because of that, and of my scanty knowledge of English, I grew quiet. For a long time, I lived in the expanses of silence that bit by bit were transformed into the texts of my poems.

In my adolescence in Georgia, I began to write long letters to my girlfriends, asking about the weather, certain flowers, fragrances, certain streets. I wanted to reconstruct all I had lost and all I longed for: my house, my grandparents' garden, the smell of the food, my friends' giggles when they talked about love. The writer in exile tries to recreate what has been drastically lost. Memory becomes her most precious ally, as well as her most disturbing obsession.

These letters allowed me to stay in direct contact with my language, with my history. Later such epistles grew into long poems that evoked the land. the longed-for country, but the political drama of Chile was also present. The experience of exile and the historical

context of my departure became the central focus of my writing. Were it not for the military coup of 1973, I would not have written poetry about the blindfolded and the disappeared, about the pain of nameless bodies buried in common graves. I wrote obsessively because I could not forget, nor did I wish to, because by writing about a darkened continent I also reconstructed my own history and my flight. My only possible return was through words.

Just as language was censored, usurped in the nations of the Southern Cone in the 1970s and 1980s, in my exile language became my only possibility of freedom, of touching my history, my country, my identity. Words brought me closer to that memorable natural world of Chile, to clandestine conversations, and it allowed me to say the unsayable. I was in exile and I could dare to say what could not be said there, in the South. But I always wondered: For whom do I say the unsayable? I wrote in Spanish and always had to rely on a faithful translator to tell my story, so that other readers could understand something of the mothers who clutched photographs of their loved ones to their breasts and asked, "Where are they?"

The writer in exile writes for an audience of remote phantoms. I wrote to say something about that gagged place called Chile, about the silence and indifference of people who succumbed to the demons of fear. But I also wrote for a U.S. audience who, though untouched by that fear, felt solidarity and sought to understand those stories of repression and pain. My status as a Chilean writer in exile and living in the United States was, and continues to be, problematic. Despite the fact that large numbers of Latin American intellectuals and writers emigrated to the United States in the 1970s, we were always a small and isolated minority. Except for people like Ariel Dorfman and Isabel Allende who wrote for a mass market, Chilean writers wrote for themselves, for each other, and for those interested in exile. Though we became members of the intellectual community in the United States, I suspect our experience was not really of interest to many, especially from 1973 to 1977.

Personally, I didn't take part in U.S. movements, like those of Chicanos and Puerto Ricans. We Latin American writers, especially those of us from the Southern Cone, had a radically different experience from those born in the United States. Our political ideology was also different. Besides, because we appeared to be an elite, we were not always accepted by Latinos in the United States. Those who wrote in English built alliances and made names for themselves, but those of us who were in thrall to the trauma of exile and the unceasing chimera of return could not, nor did we wish to integrate ourselves into a multicultural and multifaceted community. We lived immersed in our history, in our cultural heritage, quite apart from that of Latino writers, and perhaps we never emerged from that status. When we were introduced, it was as writers in exile, as if exile were a temporary illness, or an ID card.

For many writers of my generation and the one that came before, exile became a subject that defined us, marked us as if that experience were the only true sign of identity. Some wrote obsessively about the pain of living the loss of a community the loss of contact with ancestral roots. Some writers turned that pain into a tourist attraction, made for export. Their books were easy sentimental reads, rather than demanding reflections on the pain of loss that went beyond an individual's concerns.

Although obsessed, I did not take part in the tourism of pain, nor did I fall into doing agitprop poetry barely respectful of the subject. My books, Las zonas del dolor (The Zones of Pain), Circulos de la locura (Circles of Insanity), and my new novel Una cruz y una estrella, reminiscencias de una nina judia en Chile (A Cross and a Star: Reminiscences of a Jewish Girl in Chile) all allude to living on the edge of the historical circumstances in which the writer finds herself. I wrote about Chile's prisons, about faces tattooed by torture, their gazes vague and silent. Distance helped me to recreate my memory, to invent a Chile that was different from the one others lived, a Chile of myth, a Chile invented through distance.

My exile was like the one that Homer describes in The Odyssey: a form of disappearance, of ceasing to exist in the familial setting of memory, of ceasing to be part of the great clan of family alliances. I left, disappeared, and joined the nameless generation of those born between 1950 and 1955, humans moved by utopian dreams, who tried to transform Chilean society in the 1970s, many of whom then disappeared without leaving a trace of their young bodies filled with life. Only a few write now about those who died or even invoke their memory. Only their relatives remember them. I am one of a few women writers in exile who, as a form of survival, write about that lost generation, about those young people who made the revolution with pencils and poems. I write by their side, and I name them again and again, not for the tourism of pain, but for the hope of rescuing their memory, reinventing it, making it my own and everyone's, raising the consciousness of future generations in Chile and elsewhere.

For years I thought my poems and essays were written for the inhabitants of my far-off country, that somehow my writing belonged to them. But exile also gave me the power to exist in many lands, on thousands of borders, in many languages. The experience of being a Southern Cone writer in exile allowed me to become universal, to become an ally as well of the mothers who search for their children in El Salvador, in Guatemala. I could write about Anne Frank because she, like my generation, was robbed of the right to live and be happy.

Gabriela Mistral was a perpetual exile and traveler who in numerous poems and letters alluded to the fact that to live outside your own country is to live without happiness. Without the intuitive familiarity of things, I would add. To live without certain noises that put us to sleep very early in the immensity of the night and that awaken us in the softness of the morning. To live in exile is to lose the familiarity of your own face and walk the streets of foreign cities without being recognized by anyone. For a writer, exile is the solitude that is imposed in the carry around inside.

Writers in exile can go back to their country when democracy returns and many have done so. But others, though they try, find they cannot, and still others do not even want to try. Exiled writers get insidious and satirical comments from those who think they lived like heroes in their adopted countries. No one . thinks about the poor neighborhood where they lived, the restaurant where they waited on tables, or whether they could learn the language.

I have discovered that return implies another exile. The mythical Chile of my childhood, the Chile of my early adolescence and of the student Bohemia has disappeared. The Chile of my parents has vanished. We Chileans today are concerned with feeding our

children, with getting the basics to survive. We were once a generation of poets and dreamers, but we lost our lives in prisons or in clandestine jails. And we also lost our lives in exile.

Both the writer in exile and the one who stayed behind were subjected by the dictatorship to a heartrending silence, to a culture of fear, to writing in secret selfimposed codes, and to existing in the sacred no-man's land where reading is considered a subversive act. Both the exile and the one who stayed behind lived in a dangerous and foggy place, where every word could be a metaphor. Those who stayed behind were translated to the language of secret codes, the writer's accomplice. And those, like me, who left, were catalogued as foreign writers, exiles who need to be translated not only literally but in varying contexts and shades.

For me. returning to Chile is fraught with conflict. The Chile of Salvador Allende is but a myth of the past, the now-quelled dream of my parents that only exists in the memory of those who--shuttered in their homes in exile--listened to Violeta Parra, drank pisco, and gave their children a persistent longing for their lost country.

My children were born in the United States, but they speak Spanish; they like empanadas, and periodically they visit their greatgrandmother on my mother's side, the same great-grandmother who crossed the Andes on the back of a mule and survived ancestral wanderings. My children love that country where my childhood was magical, with colorful rocks and poets walking its shores. I tell them about these things I lived and perhaps I am repeating what my parents did when they told me there was a country called Chile, so far away that it seemed like a star at the end of the world.

During these long years outside Chile, I have lived in a space where borders get watered down, where writing is not so tied to place, since it includes a larger community of human beings. The possibility of being translated into English has opened new doors. I think of myself as being from a long, narrow and far-off country, but also as being from everywhere. When I go back to Chile people call me "la gringa," or they say "You're from there now." When I go to the United States they tell me, "It must be so sad to leave your country and be a foreigner." Such comments are part of my reality, a hybrid complex reality, a bicultural and bilingual reality caught between two countries, two languages, and two heritages--Christian and Jewish.

My grandparents' wanderings helped me to feel comfortable in foreign lands. I carry my father's name, Moises, like a solid metaphor of the lives of these travelers. Judaism, which was always something uncomfortable for Chilean society, especially for the upper class, has allowed me to feel comfortable in the diluted and foggy zones of nations and borders. It seems that I am always prepared to leave somewhere, taking with me the only possible homeland: language, memory, the invention of it. But I also think that even if they blindfolded me in the dark, I would find my way back to Chile.

Marjorie Agosin is a Chilean poet and professor of Spanish literature at Wellesley College. She is the author of A Cross and a Star: Reminiscences of a Jewish Girl in Chile, forthcoming from the University of New Mexico Press. Translated from the Spanish by Mark Fried.