

“Biography.”

Nidia Castro.

Abstract

This is a transcription of Nidia Castro’s handwritten notes for a memoir she was writing with a women’s writing group, on the history of exile a printed copy of which was donated to the UEL’s Documenting Chile Archive when she moved to a home after an illness in 2022. We are very grateful to Nidia’s family for donating her rich private collection to the Documenting Chile Archive as it sheds incredible light on her life, her resilience and unswerving dedication to the Socialist Party.

—Tanya Harmer and Gloria Miqueles.



I was born in Santiago in Chile 1932. My father’s family where from the south of Chile. They started out modest but then all started and became professionals. My mother's family were much better off. They were from a seaside town called Constitution. They were very religious. My mother's family were not keen on her marring my father. However, they eventually agreed

on the basis that any children my mother had would be raised in the Catholic Church. I remember when I was growing up during Easter week I would have to stay with my maternal aunts and observe the religious traditions (mass, penance etc). I was an only child, and I envied my cousins who had brothers and sisters. I wanted so much to have a sibling. During holidays and festivals, I was left with my cousins, aunts or my parent's friends who were childless, and my parents would go away on holiday. I never resented these as my parents loved each other very much and I had a very good time. Most of the time I was left with my auntie Mena, uncle Billy and my cousins Billy (like his father) and Crystal. I was very happy with them, they treated me very well and I was part of the family. Billy was like a brother to me. I used to pray for a sister or even the brother. However, my parents didn't want any more children since my mother had had a difficult stomach operation. Nobody expected her to have another child after her illness so that was it for me! When in spite of all odds I finally had a sister, it was like a miracle for me. My sister Victoria was born on 3rd July 1942 when I was 12 years old.

During my childhood and early teens there was [a] war in Europe. It was in all the papers every day and people took sides; it affected my cousins Billy and Crystal who were half German. Billy suffered aggressions because of this, even though he was just a child. Billy attended the German school and when he went back home wearing the uniform, he would have trouble with some of the local boys.

When I was 12 my father decided to send me to boarding school because I frequently disobeyed the maid who would take me to school by playing on the open tram when it was moving. So, I spent the next six years in boarding school. I didn't make many friends at the boarding school, just a few. But with one of them Yolanda, I remained friends with her and her family my whole life. She became godmother to my daughter, and I am her son's godmother. She was a kind girl.

I was very interested in what was going on in Europe and in political ideas at home, the Soviet Union, its political system, the differences that began to appear in the immediate post-war situation. At the same time, like most teenagers, I became interested in boys. I wasn't very dedicated to studying. I liked history, geography, literature, and languages. But just enough so that I could get decent grades. I couldn't risk failure at exams because it wouldn't have meant more years in boarding school. However, during the last year I tried harder to get good marks and I studied hard for my 'bachillerato' because I needed a high score to be able to study law. I was successful and got 24 points when the minimum was 22. I was so happy but then my father was completely against it. He said that he was not going to be able to support me in such an adventure and that I had to change to another career. He did not think that it was a good career for a woman and thought that I would end up being a secretary for a lawyer if I got a law degree. He didn't think that I would have a stable job from it. He suggested that I study teaching or languages. I needed my father's support, so I had to accept this, hence, I suggested teaching history and geography. But he said that I would be better off studying languages and that I should study English because of the situation globally, he said that English was the

language of the future. Of course, I failed the first year. I was so disappointed and felt betrayed. I also understood that my father at that time was very ill and wanted some security for me. My political interests have kept on developing and I opted for the Socialist Party [PS] as the one in which I felt closest and reflected my own values. I sometimes attended meetings of the PS youth but at the same time I enjoyed the freedom of being a university student and free at last from the ‘internado’ (boarding school). I started to work at an evening education school for working people who hadn't been able to finish secondary school. It was really rewarding seeing people going for a better career after finishing secondary studies.

I got married before ending my university degree which I regretted very much ever since. But at least my children have given me the reason to live and work. [They were] the centre of my existence and so my life kept on developing in two completely different fronts, on the one hand to have a good career as I became a researcher of the ‘Instituto de Investigación de la Universidad de Chile’, teacher of English with ‘Escuela de Educacion Artistica’ and on the political side, an active member of the Socialist Party.

The late 60s and the early 70s were a period of intense political involvement and exciting expectation in world affairs. As part of a delegation of socialist teachers, I went to Cuba and was able to see the care and dedication that their government had in the education and the welfare of children and young people. It made me think of small children I saw going to school early in the cold morning mist in my country in their little winter pinafores and tiny legs and what we should have been giving them but weren't, which was, so painful for me.

It was pre-election time, there was so much hope and expectation and also misgivings. Would we be able to succeed this time? Could we?

At the same time, my private life was at breaking point. My husband made things so very hard for me that I decided that I had to leave. I also thought, together with other comrades that we should help to support our party and ideas throughout the country, so I applied and got a job in the middle south of country (Chillan) where I lived the years that Allende's government lasted, working at the university and then later with peasant women in their union. At the same time, I was completely devoted to the political movement and on the day of the coup, it was decided that I should stay in the city whilst most of my comrades at the ‘Agrarian Commission’ went into the countryside still thinking that we would be able to stop and fight.

The situation got worse, and my sister came from Santiago. She had read in the papers about something she knew I was involved in and told me she had come for me, so I went to Santiago with my youngest son and my daughter stayed behind for a week. Luckily, she wasn't bothered and could join us the following week; she was very brave. In Santiago I contacted my old friend from university and colleague, Sybil, who had been worried about me because I hadn't contacted her since the coup and [she] was happy to receive me at her home in spite of the terror and apprehension. She had another two comrades hiding with her including Dario Marcotti, who had been a Catholic priest and whose story was later made into a film called ‘Ya No Basta con Rezar’ [It is not enough to pray]. After some time, I was able to go home to my

old house in Santiago (my husband had finally left) and I got some translating work to earn some money.

My sister had also helped a comrade and neighbour from Chillan and we tried to contact our party; with hindsight it really seems crazy but when you cannot be sure if it is still possible to reverse the situation, there are rumours, you are not sure of the strength on your part and that of the enemy, you want to do you are best.

Eventually I was arrested, and I was taken by the DINA (security services) to be interrogated in Villa Grimaldi. I was tortured with electric shocks several times. At one point, I found myself in a kind of closet where you couldn't sit or [lie down]. I remember being questioned by somebody in English, but this person wasn't English or American, he spoke English with a German accent. I think that the interrogation in English was because they didn't believe that I was a teacher of English, and they were testing me. It was one of the many times they interrogated me with electricity. They applied electricity on your breast and genitals, they also injected me with something which altered my perception and then put me in a narrow closet where I couldn't sit.

After the first couple of times, they took me home to answer the telephone to see if they could capture any of my comrades, luckily without result as by then they knew what had happened to me and didn't call it in. After some time, they didn't take me home anymore but kept me in this Villa Grimaldi and interrogated me again with electricity to see if I had connections with other people they had arrested. When they took you for interrogation you were always blindfolded and on one occasion, I was stood waiting to be questioned and I heard a man talking to another guard 'Do you know how to give Karate blows? Bo? Let me show you'. He took me by my arm, turned me round and hit me on my back with great blows. He left me with a back problem for life.

After some time (some weeks I think) I was taken to Cuatro Alamos prison to recover. I was then transferred to Tres Alamos prison where I stayed for some time (I don't remember exactly how long). Then the women prisoners were sent to Pirque where they were kept in an old miner's camp. Again, I don't remember exactly how long I was here for (I think maybe for 4 months). I was finally freed in September.

I had been working as a translator for an importing business and I went back to this job after my release. But things were hard. I did not get much money from this job and couldn't support myself and my three children with this. I would get paid on the 30th and by 20th the money would be gone. I had to rely on my sister for support who had two children of her own. With this all going on, the security forces started to pay attention to my middle son. Every time he went out, they would follow him, and I would receive phone calls 'do you know where you are son is, where has he gone?' I was scared for his life. I thought that if he was taken and tortured his life would never be the same again. I decided that we had to leave, and my sister made arrangements for us to go to the UK where we were given asylum.



Nidia Castro on at the Piquete de Londres, 1998

After some years in England, when I was working for the Refugee Council, a work acquaintance noticed that I was limping. He put me in contact with the Doctor working with refugees /victims of torture and he treated my back and then referred me to the management of pain hospital. They helped me with my back although the problem has never gone, for years.



Nidia Castro with friends, June 2022.