Thirty years ago, my son married a wonderful Uruguayan woman. They met in Cuba, where we were living at the time. Laura had arrived with her father and sister, refugees from the Dirty War then engulfing her tiny South American country. Gregory and Laura would go on to France, where they lived for more than a decade and where their three children were born. But eventually, like Laura’s father, sister, and so many others, they would return to Uruguay. The dictatorship had fallen. Only the scars remained.

Over the years my partner and I tried to visit Uruguay once every year or two. The country began inhabiting a place in our hearts. We witnessed its complex journey through pseudodemocracy to the increasing popularity of a Broad Front (Frente Amplio, FA), and finally the installation of a progressive government. At family asados—the Uruguayan version of our barbeque—several generations would sit around sharing mate, the popular infusion held in a gourd and sipped through a silver straw, and talk about all sorts of things. Little by little, I came to know Laura’s large extended family. Generations included aging aunt Augusta, who had played such an important mothering role to younger members of various ages, those who had been forced into exile and those who had stayed. And then there were the youngest, who inherited the dark era only because it was a permanent reference for their parents and grandparents.

One night at the family’s small beach house in the little fishing community of Santa Lucía del Este, sitting out under southern stars, I asked about those years when siblings had been separated by repression and exile. While Laura and her sister Ana did their university studies in Havana, their older brother Pablo and his future wife María did theirs in Montevideo. The war had affected them all in different ways. That evening’s conversation taught me how different the experience had been for each of them, and I also learned that they had never before gotten together to compare notes.

Listening, and occasionally contributing to, that conversation was Emilia Carlevaro, Laura’s aunt. Not only had she stayed in the country, she’d been a member of the Movement of National Liberation (MLN) Tupamaros, the armed struggle organization that eventually helped restore the country’s freedom. I knew she had spent a number of years in prison, that like so many she had been tortured,
Uruguay: A Woman Remembers

and that in the postwar years she worked with the families of the disappeared. I knew she was a doctor who ministered to the residents of one of the city’s marginal neighborhoods. In this family Emilia holds an elder’s status. She is always there for its youngest members, and for anyone else needing her support.

I knew that if I could convince Emilia to tell her story, it would not only offer a valuable history but also hold lessons for new generations of activists. I wanted to explore a Uruguayan experience: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay suffered together, their revolutionary cadres crossed borders often, as did Operación Cóndor, the regional paramilitary organization charged with destroying them. And yet small Uruguay is often left out of the literature.

When I wrote to Emilia, asking if I could interview her, her immediate answer was no. She offered the usual “I wasn’t that important” argument. I wrote back that I understood. I was disappointed but respected her decision. And then suddenly, in response to my acceptance of her refusal, she changed her mind. I still don’t know why, but I’m grateful. I prepared a list of questions. And little by little, over a couple of months, she answered them via email more fully and forthrightly than I could have hoped. The following is based on our conversation.

Margaret Randall (MR): Emilia, although vivid in the memories of some, most people in the United States really don’t have much of an understanding of what Uruguay was like throughout the 1960s and ’70s. Can you talk to me about how you experienced the country back then, what motivated you to join an armed struggle organization, and exactly when you became a member? Were you still studying, or were you working? Was your family politically progressive? Did you live legally for a while before you went underground?

Emilia Carlevaro (EC): In 1958, through struggle on several fronts—including one in the streets that was cruelly repressed—the Uruguayan student movement was able to pass an Organic University Law assuring its autonomy and self-governance.

One interesting aspect of that struggle was that it coincided with struggles being waged by workers. They too were brutally repressed, resulting in loss of jobs and salaries. There’s a slogan from that time that synthesizes the joint mobilizations: Obreros y estudiantes, unidos y adelante! (Workers and students, forward united!) I was only 15 at the time, but I remember the general perception was that the neo-Batllista model had run its course, that the country couldn’t go on as it was, that something had to give.

The 1960s saw increased demands for a change in course. Salaried farm workers, especially the cane cutters in the north, joined with workers from the city. A group of cane cutters came on foot from the extreme northern part of the country; Raúl Sendic had gone to work with them, and they marched from town to town camping out, talking to people along the way about the misery caused by the large landowners. The problem of land was in the air.

I was at the university by then and my union, the Association of Medical Students, hosted some of the cane cutters and their families. When classes were
over for the day, we’d drop in on them, listen to their stories, and converse. The cane cutters became familiar with our world as well. And the trade unions built an organization that represented everyone. It was in this activist atmosphere that we began to discuss our future.

The trade union movement, still in process of unification, organized The People’s Congress in 1965, with the participation not only of workers but of all the popular sectors: students, cooperativists, professionals, artists, neighborhood groups, housewives, and so forth. More than 700 organizations took part. It was at that Congress that we agreed that we were not experiencing a momentary crisis but one that was deep and systemic. And we devised programmatic measures aimed at forging our own destiny, measures posited on “work, peace, and freedom.”

Meanwhile, and as a result of the crisis, the conservative sectors of the traditional political parties that had taken turns governing the country moved farther to the right. In 1959 the Uruguayan government signed the first letter of intent with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), initiating a long history of debt and dependency. Every day the government took greater refuge in its immediate security measures, which translated as a suspension of civil rights imposed by the executive and required the seal of approval of parliament—similar to a state of siege. Armed groups of ultra-rightists began attacking the university.

In 1961 Che Guevara, who had come to a meeting of the Inter-American Economic and Social Council (a branch of the Organization of American States, OAS), gave a speech at our university. As he finished speaking, a bullet killed someone in the audience, a young man named Arbelio Ramírez. The police dispersed us all with tear gas and beatings. That crime, which was never solved, signaled the beginning of modern Uruguay’s history of political violence. In 1962, neo-Nazi groups kidnapped a Paraguayan who lived here, Soledad Barret, and carved swastikas on her thighs before releasing her. In 1964, Uruguay broke relations with Cuba.

By 1968, during the Pacheco Areco administration, repressive forces and the newly formed death squads began assassinating students who took part in street demonstrations.³ Some people say that Uruguay was “Latin Americanized” then. It wasn’t only social or economic. Uruguay has always had a high degree of international awareness. People persecuted throughout the region (Brazilians, Argentinians, Paraguayans, Bolivians) had traditionally found refuge in our country. Now this began to change.

In Uruguay, from the end of the 1960s and especially in 1968, this polarization also found its way into the ranks of the traditional political parties, and their most progressive sectors ended up breaking away. At the same time, the Left began to unite, prioritizing the need to join forces rather than get bogged down in the typical sorts of endless discussions. Because the country had such a large number of immigrants, the Uruguayan Left had inherited more from European than from Latin American revolutionary theory.
In 1971 the Frente Amplio (FA) was born. It included a range of positions: progressive dissidents from the traditional parties, a variety of Left parties and tendencies (socialist, communist, Trotskyist, Christians, libertarians, etc.) and independents. The FA came into being in a Uruguay in crisis, under a despotic and repressive government. It was a country filled with political prisoners, where torture was routine, people were shot dead in the streets, ultra-rightist groups were active, there was censorship of the press and of political life, salaries were frozen, and trade unionists were persecuted. And still, people resisted; they mobilized. The MLN supported the FA.

**MR:** What did two such different organizations, the FA and MLN, have in common? One was a mass organization, open to everyone. The other was an organization of political cadre. One was able to act legally. The other acted clandestinely. One espoused a parliamentary political strategy. The other’s strategy was one of armed struggle. So why did the MLN support the FA? Why didn’t it disrupt the elections? Why did it urge people to vote for the FA?

**EC:** Both organizations were born around the same time and their members came from the same social origins (worker and student struggles, the trade unions, the professional associations, and general popular unrest). We recognized the importance of unity, and knew we could achieve that unity only if we acted on principle and emphasized what we agreed on. If we were able to unite over what we had in common we would be stronger. If we fought among ourselves we’d not only weaken the popular struggle, we’d fail.

At that moment we adopted an attitude of pushing everything that was secondary aside. We had a saying: “Action unites us; words pull us apart.” For example, the various Marxist groups stopped talking about what had happened at this or that International. The anarchists stopped calling everyone bureaucrats. Catholics stopped reproaching secular militants about “the opiate of the people.” Not to mention what those in the traditional political parties said about those on the Left, and viceversa.

In an oppressive and repressive country, progressive people liberated themselves from prejudices and dogmas. In a nation of radicals we learned to agree. Under an authoritarian government we learned the importance of tolerance, to respect those who thought differently, to forge unity. We paid a lot more attention to where we were going than to where we’d been.

The FA and MLN also had something else in common: they reasoned as Latin Americans—with regard not only to Latin America’s current political, economic, and social realities, but also to our history, the philosophy we inherited from our first struggles for independence, and what that philosophy could offer us now.

Both the FA and MLN found inspiration in *artiguismo*, the legacy of José Gervasio Artigas Arnal (June 19, 1764–September 23, 1850), Uruguay’s national hero, sometimes called the father of the nation. Who could have imagined, back when both movements were persecuted and devastated by the dictatorship, that
31 years after the coup the FA would be voted into government on the first round, and that five years later it would win again, installing a Tupamaro guerrilla as president of the republic. Many of us who were young back then couldn’t conceive of being able to defend ourselves and attacking that brute power through any other means than the force of arms. Furthermore, we believed that even if we could somehow impose a transformative program, it would be decimated unless we were able to put up an effective resistance. We knew what had happened in other countries that had experienced the “misfortune” of electing independent popular governments. There’d been a long list of invasions and coups. Bay of Pigs was fresh in our minds, and not far behind it was Arbenz’s Guatemala. We knew the price we would have to pay, as was later demonstrated in Chile, in Sandinista Nicaragua, and elsewhere.

And so, in 1966 or 1967 many of us joined the recently formed MLN. Until I was taken prisoner for the first time, in 1969, I participated legally, through my professional association. But at the same time I was functioning underground, building infrastructure and working on logistics. I always worked and studied at the same time. I worked in a basic sciences lab. And I studied a lot, because back then student militants believed we needed to be good students. We liked to study for the sake of learning, of course, but we also felt we had to be outstanding students in order to gain the respect of our comrades and of the professors and administrators at the university we co-governed.

I want to say that adopting armed struggle is never an easy decision. It cost me a lot, and I know it cost other comrades as well. To engage in armed struggle is not the same as picking up a weapon in a moment of indignation or in order to defend oneself against someone committing a crime. It is the acceptance of a particular path of struggle, a strategy that always causes conflicts when one’s goal is construction and peace.

This has nothing to do with the natural human fear of what might happen to you, a fear you can overcome. It’s the terrible sensation that comes with entering a world of violence, of war. It’s participating in something where you wish no one had to be. Armed struggle generates problems of conscience, and in order to take it on you must be convinced that it’s the only possible route. Of course rage and rebellion are always there, pushing you forward, but it’s a conscious decision in which other considerations also hold you back.

The other day a comrade told me: “I was lucky because I never had to kill anyone.” I understand what he meant, and I share the feeling. At the same time I know what happened to others who weren’t so lucky. Even as it adopted armed struggle, the MLN tried to be careful not to cause unnecessary death.

I don’t really know how to describe my family’s politics. Perhaps the closest thing to the truth is that they were activists of life; they appreciated hard work, decency, and solidarity. When the hard times came, because they favored change they joined the FA. During the dictatorship my family suffered a great deal, but
everyone remained stalwart, doing what they could, helping and risking their own lives.

My father, whom I knew mainly through the stories of my family and his friends and colleagues, died when I was five years old. He was a doctor in love with his profession. I know this as well from some of his patients whom I myself treated many years later. I remember one old woman I sent to see my nephew who is a cardiologist. She told me, “You father was a gentleman, your nephew too.” The term gentleman isn’t something people say easily here. It doesn’t just mean someone who is correct and kind, but someone who is good to others. My father was one of the best gynecologists in the country, and he never used his profession to make money. He was a trade unionist. When he died he didn’t even own a car, despite the fact that he was born into a family that was economically comfortable.

My mother, who had emigrated from Italy with her parents and siblings, was an untiring and ingenious worker. She accompanied my father on his house calls to a nearby neighborhood where the people were very poor. He asked her to teach them how to cook healthy meals with what they had and how to add nutritious ingredients at little cost. When my father died, my mother did what was necessary to keep the family going. My brothers, who were students at the time and were also active in the student movement, began working young. They were leftists.

MR: How did you live your gender within the MLN? Was it something you thought about at the time? I remember that those of us in other parts of Latin America saw the Tupamaros as pretty advanced in terms of women’s participation and decision-making. But I don’t know if that perception reflected reality.

EC: I want to say something before answering that question, and it can be applied to other questions as well. The organization was composed of compartmentalized cells and columns that were also compartmentalized. So I can only talk about what I experienced directly, through my relationship with others when I was in prison or in exile. It’s a lot, but it doesn’t represent the entirety of the organization nor its evolution.

Gender was not one of the things we discussed. Our vision had more to do with what we took with us from society as a whole, or rather, from the social sectors from which we came. Other things that affected women’s participation and decision-making were the urban nature of the MLN-Tupamaros, the respect we felt for all our comrades—male and female—and the fact that we rejected classical military notions of power. We had a critical attitude toward many socially accepted traditions. We always questioned authority. We came from a world of work and study. We had our own history of social activism, in which women already had a recognized identity.

Uruguayan society, in contrast with other Latin American societies, was deeply marked by the political and humanistic liberalism of Batllismo. In Uruguay the separation of church and state, as well as divorce—including divorce initiated by
the woman—date to the early twentieth century. Ours was the first country in South America to establish women’s suffrage, in 1927. And none of these rights were given to us. We fought for them all.

This doesn’t mean, though, that we didn’t have gender problems. We still have them today. Even the most advanced of our male comrades suffered from residual machismo. I remember that in our assemblies the women often asked, ironically, “Is there a compañero (male comrade) who wants to volunteer to take notes?” It was all too common for the men to expect the women to do the note taking, and most of them were given to endless oratory. But this sort of confrontation was low-key. We didn’t consider it overly important, and we felt that we were making progress, slowly but steadily.

Inside the organization, consideration and respect for women was explicitly taught. From my own experience, and the experiences of others during those early years, I can’t remember a single example of lack of respect for the women comrades, nor an instance of preventing women from assuming responsibilities. I would say, on the contrary, that our male comrades treated us fairly, with consideration and kindness. Look, to affect a believable cover, I often had to be the “woman,” “girlfriend,” or such for comrades when we used hotels where couples went to make love. I often had to live in close quarters with one or more male comrades. Never once did anyone show me the slightest disrespect. And I don’t know of any other case where that happened. I remember, sometimes around 1972, that the organization expelled a guy because he hit his wife.

On the other hand, we had to respect social custom in order not to attract too much attention. For example, women as well as men drove the cars, but we always paid attention to what would attract the least amount of attention wherever we were working. In this respect, if someone had to drive a truck in order to move heavy equipment, a man usually drove. If smaller but equally important items had to be moved, women carried them in handbags or in a car. It wasn’t about prejudice, but about what was most socially acceptable.

The MLN was a political/military organization. Each cell had its own responsibilities, linked through other cells to those of the rest of the organization. In general, all the cells had both men and women. Urban struggle demands many tasks that men and women can do together. The superior might be of either sex. It was always the norm that the job was collective but the responsibility individual. Each column had a command, which was the cell that led the column. But there were no commanders. We didn’t have military ranks in the organization, nor insignias, nor any of those things that denote traditional power relations.

Ours was a highly disciplined organization, but we insisted on the concept of conscious discipline, not one that was imposed. Of course, in any military-type action, large or small, there’s always a person responsible who must be obeyed. But the obedience was a one-time thing, not ongoing. The MLN’s great discipline was more like that of a highly professional sports contingent, a surgical team, or a well-trained orchestra than like the discipline one might find in traditional military life.
We lived and walked among the population and had a normal life except for our clandestine identity as Tupas, as we called ourselves back then. Ordinary life was our natural territory, our cover. We tried to fit in. This matter of not isolating ourselves was very important and enabled us to move freely among different sectors of the population. Living this way, we were able to establish a dialogical relationship, one of mutual influence. This anchored us and kept us real. Having “eyes and ears everywhere,” as we thought of this relationship, allowed us to know what people were thinking and what they needed. And this social immersion protected us from dogmatisms, from the sort of errors common to organizations that are removed from the masses.

Maybe it was this social conscience with regard to women that caused those of you watching us from afar to consider us advanced.

**MR:** Can you tell me a little more about your life in the organization? What were your specific tasks? Did you take part in any of the spectacular actions carried out by the Tupamaros during those years, and if so, which ones?

**EC:** The MLN never publicized the names of those who took part in military actions, either inside nor outside the organization. This was for two reasons: one obviously had to do with security, and the other was because beyond the specific comrades who had a protagonist’s role every large action required the participation of many different members.

But to respond to what I think lies beneath your question about the Tupas’ military modus operandi, I’d like to say a few things. The MLN was a clandestine organization, mostly composed of people who also led an aboveground life. We always tried to protect the legality of the comrades. We acted in a milieu in which, as we said, “there are just a few of us, and we know who we are.” It was always important to us that a military action come out “clean,” that is to say without wounded or dead. For this reason, each large operation took a great deal of planning, a great deal of research, foreseeing any eventuality, a lot of imagination.

For example, in order to carry out two spectacular prison breaks, as in the cases of *La estrella* (the second women’s escape) or *El abuso* (the big escape from the men’s prison), tunnels had to be dug. You can’t imagine how much every single cubic meter of earth represented, and the work of doing away with it without calling attention to what we were doing! How many people took part in each of those actions? I don’t know, but they were a lot.

**MR:** How and when were you captured the first time, Emilia? What was the period of transition like between being subjected to torture and joining ordinary prison life? How long were you in prison in all? What was your relationship with the other political prisoners? Were there common criminals in the same prison and, if so, did you also sustain relations with them?
EC: I was captured for the first time in 1969, when the police raided a house where we were working. It was a place where explosives were being made. The police treated us roughly, but this was still during the time of so-called democracy. We weren’t tortured. They took us to the women’s prison on Cabildo Street, and it was from there that we escaped the following 8th of March. That prison was run by religious sisters of the Congregation of the Good Shepherd. We were their first political prisoners, and they housed us in a small wing along with two common criminals.

The political prisoners got on well together, despite the fact that we weren’t all from the same organization. We had discussions about everything, including politics, and we supported one another and shared our material goods. The ordinary prisoners worked in other parts of the prison so we had little contact with them, although what contact we did have was always respectful and supportive.

MR: I remember that you were involved in that famous escape that took place on March 8th, 1970, International Women’s Day. Can you talk a little more about that operation, how it was organized, and how you were recaptured?

EC: We explored every corner of that prison where we were allowed to go. Any excuse for an “outing” was good because we needed to stretch the walls of our imprisonment. We even got to go to an elementary school. The teacher was great; she talked with us and encouraged us to prepare materials for her students. And so, when the sisters invited us to mass in the prison chapel, we went as well.

The first time we attended mass, we were in for a surprise: the chapel was open to the public. It was in the shape of a cross and the long axis was divided in two: the central nave that ran from the street doors to the altar—this was where the public could attend—and a second section behind the altar, which was where the sisters heard mass. The short axis, which was cut by the long one and separated from it by bars, was where we prisoners sat. So from one of the cross’s shorter arms we could see and be seen from the central part of the nave.

We began to take advantage of this discovery. Friends and work colleagues began to attend mass there. It allowed us to see each other, smile and exchange a furtive signal or two. At the same time, among the prisoners there were some who knew a lot about music. Under their tutelage we began singing in our free time. One day the sisters, who logically wanted to further our religious instruction, suggested that since we were regularly attending mass we might want to sing at a service. We were enthusiastic about the idea.

As we became familiar with the prison, we discovered that the door that led to where the sisters attended mass was next to a statue of the Virgin Mary and that it didn’t have a lock. And so the idea of freedom grabbed us. The street was right there! Plans for an escape began to take shape. We wrote to our comrades on the outside and they too began to see the possibilities.
They began to attend mass and study an eventual escape operation. They took care of the preparations on the outside; we did the same on the inside. They took responsibility for reducing the prison’s external guard and for planning the operation. All we had to do was show up in the area where the sisters sat. We became assiduous devotees of the Virgin, bringing her flowers at every opportunity. And each time we did, we tried that door. It was never locked.

One problem remained: both sides of the operation had to be perfectly synchronized. What had to be done on the outside couldn’t commence if we on the inside weren’t ready, and vice versa. We had to have a viable signal at the moment the operation was due to begin. This couldn’t be verbal; it had to be visual. We agreed on a sign for “we’re ready” and another for “let’s go.”

A few days after we escaped, a comrade we called Julia and I were recaptured along with the comrade who had been responsible for the locale where we were picked up originally. We were taken like imbeciles: asleep.

That second time, they were rougher with us than they had been before. They tortured our comrade a lot. We never knew why he suffered torture and we didn’t. Maybe since the two of us had been in prison for months they presumed—with good reason—that we didn’t have any useful information. Our prison conditions got much worse, though.

MR: I know that you spent time in an Argentinian prison and then also in one in Uruguay. Were there marked differences between those two prison experiences, or did Operation Condor manage to internationalize the levels of horror?

EC: It’s hard to make comparisons because prison conditions are mostly determined by governments. On the several occasions in which I was in prison in Uruguay, aside from the deterioration of democracy the rule of law still held. As long as we had democracy, broken though it was, prison conditions in both countries were more or less the same. Each country in its own way respected the basic issues, such as the cleanliness of the cells, the quality of the food, and access to a defense (lawyer visits, trips to court, etc.). We had minimal healthcare, some exercise time, and so on. The prisons in both countries suffered from a sort of inertia, and this worked in our favor because it took longer for them to catch up with government brutality. But life for political prisoners got a lot more brutal as the dictatorships consolidated themselves.

I should say that when I talk about prisons I’m talking about legal establishments and not those detention centers that existed in some of the military barracks or police stations. If you were taken to one of those, they left you battered and bloody, and you might remain there indefinitely. That’s where they tortured the political prisoners. Those places existed even before the dictatorship. When you found yourself in one of them, although it may sound strange, you longed to be transferred to a regular prison.
We were captured in Argentina during Isabel Peron’s government. The repression was in the hands of paramilitary groups, death squads, and such. This was just before the dictatorship in Argentina; in Uruguay the coup had already taken place. Prisoners were moved back and forth, and there were Uruguayan governmental and paramilitary operatives working in Argentina, carrying out assassinations, disappearances, etc. Operation Condor already existed, but it wasn’t until after the coup in Argentina that it really spread its wings.

I was in an Argentinian prison when the coup took place in that country. That’s when everything changed. We had been in Olmos Prison in Buenos Aires province, where the conditions were similar to those at Cabildo in Uruguay. Then they moved us to Villa Devoto, in the capital city. Devoto was a maximum security prison, part of the federal penitentiary system. We were no longer in the hands of the military. They brought other women prisoners in from the provinces as well. They had been subjected to utter horror. The stories the women of Cordoba told constitute one of the most sinister chapters in the history of those times. For them, Devoto was a blessing.

General Menéndez, chief of the Third Army, which was headquartered in Cordoba, was nicknamed the Jacal or Hyena; that should give you an idea. He was in charge of the prison in Cordoba. The women comrades say that he or his officials would come around from time to time and force them to run around the patio. When someone dropped from exhaustion no one was allowed to help. A soldier would simply execute the fallen prisoner on the spot, in front of everyone.

That was where they began using the vice. One very cold day they took a prisoner and put him in the vice. And they ordered the rest of the prisoners to stand and watch him for hours until he died. The comrades swear that the following day a flower appeared on that spot. Imagine, if this was what the dictatorship was doing in a legal prison, what must they have been doing in the clandestine dungeons?

Devoto was, as we called it, the dictatorship’s transparent correctional institution, the one they showed outsiders when they were forced to explain what was going on. And that’s where all of us women political prisoners were held. There were common criminals there with us as well. We were Argentinians, Chileans, Paraguayans, Uruguayans, and Brazilians, among others. We’d all been captured prior to the coup. Remember that in Argentina after the coup (in contrast with other countries in the region) there were practically no new political prisoners. General Harguindeguy, who was the Minister of the Interior, was very clear when he said: “People will be detained, but there will be no prisoners.” He meant that whoever was captured would be murdered or disappeared. And that’s exactly what happened.

In spite of the fact that Devoto was the show prison, it was a tough one and it only got tougher. There were all sorts of prohibitions: no TV, no classes, no work, no crafts, no packages from the outside, and no visits involving physical contact (we could only see people through a glass window). Our mail was censored. We couldn’t wear our own clothes, only uniforms. There was constant punishment,
and a lot of arbitrary treatment. The prison authorities made our lives impossible any way they could. There was a lot of solitary confinement.

Something typical at Devoto was making you wear summer uniforms in winter, and vice versa, with the extreme heat and cold that characterizes Buenos Aires. And they waited for the food to get cold before passing it out. They would deny us exercise for the most insignificant reasons, or keep someone confined to her cell for weeks.

Once we were all lined up to go out to the patio—it had been a while since we’d been allowed out—and suddenly they announced a new rule: we all had to be wearing bras. The guard gave the order: “Everyone show your bra buckle with your left index finger!” One of the prisoners said she wasn’t wearing a bra, and asked permission to go and put one on. She was in her cell getting dressed again when the whistle blew giving the signal for us to march to the patio. The guard slammed her cell door shut, yelling: “You’re not ready so you won’t get to go out.” We all heard our comrade telling that guard to fuck off, and a horrified silence descended upon us as we imagined what was in store for her. That guard opened the cell door and asked: “Were you talking to me?” “Of course I was,” the prisoner responded, enraged. All of a sudden that guard regained a bit of her humanity: “Okay, no exercise for you today, but no punishment either.” It was extremely rare that a guard showed her humanity like that, but it did happen once in a while.

We prepared ourselves mentally so as not to fall prey to their provocations or to the general misery of the prison, but from time to time we’d become enraged. We couldn’t help dreaming. We were very clear that the goal at that prison was to break us, to destroy our humanity. And we invested enormous energy trying to avoid that. We helped each other overcome our fear and not become resentful. We took care of and protected one another. Our time there was consumed with figuring out how to make life a little more bearable. We invented activities, told stories, exercised.

What news we did get from outside was whatever came in with visitors, and it was bleaker by the day. The repression was getting worse. Sometimes our visitors weren’t even able to come. Devoto, for me as for many other women, was an extraordinary experience. It forced us to find the best in ourselves. It taught us to really see our comrades, to support them and to receive support. We lived our solidarity profoundly.

I won’t lie and tell you that the prison experience didn’t leave its mark on us, but very few of us were scarred forever. Very few of us were unable to remake our lives despite what we had been through. This was our modest but incomparable victory. I will always feel the deepest love, most profound respect, and greatest pride in my comrades at Devoto. My memories of their attitudes, of their spirit, have helped me ever since, and I have no doubt they will help me for the rest of my life.

**MR:** When and how were you finally released from prison? I know you were married before you landed in prison and that your marriage didn’t survive that experience.
So I’m also interested in knowing if ruptured relationships were common among the prisoners—women as well as men—and if so, why you think that is?

**EC:** In June 1978 Argentina hosted the World Soccer Meet. That put the country in the spotlight internationally. Great numbers of people insisted that the meet not be held in a country that so massively and systematically violated human rights. In all the countries where teams had been selected to take part, especially in Europe, there were important campaigns. There were even some very famous players who decided not to participate. All this made the dictatorship nervous, actually furious. As a way of improving its image, it expelled all its foreign prisoners.

Another comrade and I had Italian citizenship. Italy, through its embassies in the region, had gone to bat for us as much as it was able. I remember that the consul, after a number of attempts, was able to visit us at Devoto. Other European countries offered political asylum to those who had other citizenships, just so they wouldn’t be returned to Uruguay.

One morning in April of 1978 they released me from Devoto, brought me to the federal police headquarters, and along with another comrade who had been expelled to Spain took us to the airport. They handcuffed us to one another and ordered us to act like a couple. They had our coats covering the handcuffs, so no one who saw us would be aware of the fact that we were prisoners. In the airport they took us to the office of the military guard and let us say goodbye to our families. And from there it was each of us to our plane. From a prison cell to Rome!

My husband and I each got through our prison years pretty well, but our relationship didn’t survive. And yes, this was pretty common among couples in which one or both had been separated by prison for a number of years. Was it because of the prison experience itself, or simply because of the prolonged separation? In my case, while my husband spent an uninterrupted number of years behind bars, I was underground, in prison, and in exile.

Each couple is a world unto itself. Both people change. There may be many reasons why people move apart. Look, we were both very young when we got together. Each of us matured in the particular conditions to which we were subjected. I’m sure that the physical separation, the different experiences each of us had, our inability to process things on a daily basis—all of that was a big influence. Was it the determining factor? I don’t know, because there were others as well. What weight did the “new” world, in which we found ourselves when we got out of prison, have? Did we have the same vision about how to insert ourselves in that world? And how did each of us process the defeat? How had our individual sensibilities been affected by what we had been through?

**MR:** How was your transition from prison life to the outside world? What do you see as having been the greatest challenges?

**EC:** Rome is a magnificent city, not only because of its natural beauty and the culture that emanates from so many years of rich history, but because it has an
open atmosphere. People are very welcoming and kind. In less than a month I was working in a factory, in a town on the outskirts of Rome. Every weekend I would go into the city to be with my comrades.

The Uruguayan Italians (like the Argentine Italians and everyone from other countries who had dual Italian citizenship) had the opportunity of exiling ourselves in other European countries (because we had Italian citizenship we couldn’t request exile status in Italy), but we didn’t want to do that. We wanted to lead a normal life. Because we didn’t write Italian, we were only able to get jobs as manual laborers. We understood Italian, we could read and speak it (albeit badly). But we couldn’t write it. In any case, I personally welcomed another period of what we then called “working-class experience.” And so there was a break in my medical studies.

The European Left and the democratic sectors of the population—all of which were very strong at the time—showed great solidarity with the Latin American revolutionaries. We worked hard. We gave testimony and denounced the situations that continued to exist in our countries. There was a great deal of coordination with Argentines and Chileans. At the same time, we were discovering another world, the so-called first world. Developed capitalism, with all the attractions and self-involvement it offers.

Among ourselves we talked about how our fellow workers, who had freed themselves from the constraints of miserable salaries and minimal subsistence—which battered our own workers back home more and more—now suffered under another burden called consumerism. Overtime, extra piecework, and a second job were all common in Italy back then. Working people weren’t struggling just to put food on their tables; they wanted the latest technological devices as well. This was a world it cost us a lot to understand. We were shocked at the waste. And we didn’t envision our future there. We were obsessed with returning to Uruguay. And if returning to Uruguay turned out to be impossible, then we wanted to return to Latin America. In 1980 I went to live in Venezuela.

There, besides working toward democracy in Uruguay, I began working with the families of the disappeared in the different Latin American countries. We founded the Latin American Federation of Associations of Families of the Detained and Disappeared. I remained in Venezuela until the dictatorship fell in 1985.

MR: I know that your work with the families of the disappeared continues to this day; and that you also earned your medical degree and have been working for many years as a doctor in an impoverished neighborhood of Montevideo. This work, to a large extent, seems a continuation of your desire to better the lives of the poorest among us. At the same time, years have gone by and the situation in Latin America has changed a great deal since the era of the Dirty Wars. We now have several countries with governments that are progressive to one extent or another. Unfortunately, today’s panorama presents as many problems as it does successes. How do you see the current situation in Uruguay? What do you consider the opportunities for greatest change? What lessons have you learned?
EC: Once I was able to return to Uruguay, I got together with an old friend from my days of political militancy—he had also been in prison—and we decided to finish medical school. Medicine had advanced considerably in those 17 years we hadn’t cracked a book! It took us a while, because both of us were working, but we managed to finish. The two of us went into different specialties. I chose internal medicine.

I got to the neighborhood you mention through a university program called Apex. Our university has always been very involved in the needs of the community, through a variety of social service initiatives. I knew many of the people involved in these programs, among them my brother Pablo, and this led to my involvement with Apex. I had many experiences aside from working at the clinic itself. I was in charge of groups of students who were doing their residencies at the polyclinic. We taught them to see their patients as whole human beings, not simply as people with particular physical ills. We studied the community in which we worked, its economy, its culture, its living conditions. We encouraged the people themselves to develop projects that would improve their living conditions, their relationships and so forth. It was an interdisciplinary experience in which we all learned a lot from each other. We developed excellent relationships of trust, respect, and affection.

The brutal economic crisis of 2002–2003 found us working in that neighborhood. We’d never before seen so many patients come into the clinic thin and complaining of hunger. We opened communal dining rooms in order to try to alleviate the situation. We collected foodstuffs and cooked for everyone at least once but often twice a day. In spite of the general hardship, our society showed great solidarity with its poorest members.

We all felt indignant and pained at the situation. It was a very difficult period (the experts say it was the worst economic crisis in our history). We felt that the very viability of the nation was at stake. Fortunately, the population as a whole, the political parties, and the social organizations reacted calmly, with intelligence and a constructive spirit. We didn’t see any violent protests or destabilizing actions. The people themselves guaranteed the continuance of democracy. And as a result of all this, two years later the Right suffered a brutal defeat. The FA’s candidate won the presidency in the first round.

In Caracas, as I said, I had begun to work with the families of the disappeared. We were in contact with exiles from different South American countries and began to create a database of reports of disappearances by date and place, and to publicize our findings. We met in San José, Costa Rica, and that’s where we established the organization’s headquarters. In 1981 we met again in Caracas. That’s when the Latin American Federation of Associations of Families of the Detained and Disappeared got its real start. A group of comrades of different nationalities worked with the secretariat. I was one of these. It was a period of a great deal of work, obtaining ever better connections with the local groups in the different countries, building our archives, cross-referencing, and putting out our first publications. We denounced
what was happening before the various governmental bodies (the United Nations, the Organization of American States) as well as before the nongovernmental organizations. And we traveled everywhere it was possible to go. We gathered reports of new atrocities, recorded testimonies, systematized the information, and supported the families left behind.

The Association played an important role in the overall struggle. And its responsibilities increased. We learned a lot about the repressive methodologies, their causes, and prospects for the future. The exchange of experiences, and the sense of cross-border solidarity, helped us develop instruments aimed at keeping these crimes from ever happening again. We had legal support, and it was the Federation, with the active participation of the families, that helped establish the first international legal instruments (through the UN and the OAS): first the declarations, then the conventions that made the forced disappearance of human beings illegal.

There is so much to be learned from this experience, and from the epic drama personified by the families of the disappeared who, all through those dark years, always insisted that the real victims weren’t them but the disappeared themselves. I believe the Federation is a very valuable part of the social movement in Latin America. I worked in the secretariat until I returned to Uruguay. Then I continued working with the families here for several more years.

But getting back to Latin America as a whole, you’re right, in the past 10 to 15 years the continent has changed a great deal, and in general for the better. I will concentrate on talking about South America, which is the part I know best. This region in general, despite each country’s particularities, was devastated by the dictatorships, by their own internal conflicts (which continue in the case of Colombia), and by the neoliberal polices of the 1990s. The region was impoverished, stripped bare, utterly decimated. These countries suffered tremendous disintegration, with millions living in poverty or extreme poverty, millions shoved to the margins of society. Furthermore, this is a region that lost so many of its political and social cadres during the worst periods of repression. Political movements and mass organizations were completely destroyed. All opposition parties were prohibited, especially those on the left, their members persecuted, repressed, and punished.

South America, like most of Latin America, was accustomed by then to being governed by dictators and by parties rife with scandalous levels of corruption. It was burdened with international debt and thus tied to the dictates of the international lending institutions. Society had reached unbelievable levels of inequality. After the dictatorships, a state of rights was reestablished with elected governments, most of them center-right—but these were unable to offer solutions to systemic problems. Socioeconomic, ethical, cultural, and military questions remained to be solved, and neoliberalism appeared with its onslaught of privatization programs and, worse, with its “do your own thing” philosophy.
During those limited democracies the people were determined not to permit further coups or dictatorships. They demanded a respect for rights. But what rights? The rights of big business that had already been institutionalized, or the rights of the people? What about the right to freedom? And what about the responsibilities that went along with those rights? I believe that the human rights movement, and in particular the movement of the families of the disappeared, had and still have important contributions to make in these discussions.

Democratic stability allowed the progressive forces to begin a process of accumulation of strength. We shouldn’t forget that the Left in Latin America was orphaned by the implosion of the Soviet Union and, although not as obviously, also by the end of European social democracy. The Latin American Left no longer had the reference points through which it had been able to illustrate its dreams to those it hoped to recruit. We never talk about the latter, perhaps because so many of the political parties, many of their members very honorable men and women, had such a close association with social democracy. At the same time, we could all perceive the new international balance of power, the immense danger emanating from the fact that the wolf was running around frisky and free.

Without those international reference points, the Left had to generate its own ideas and reestablish its theoretical framework in the face of tremendous obstacles. And all this while the end of history was being proclaimed and capitalistic hegemony and ideology were being firmly established. Each country had its own process, and its progressive forces were also different. But by the first decade of the twenty-first century, a majority of the countries in South America had progressive governments. This was, and is, a new and promising situation, but—for me at least—it remains unstable, unconsolidated. We had an immense responsibility in our hands. The profound, democratic, popular, and independent transformation of a region of more than 17 million square kilometers with 400 million inhabitants, with enormous natural resources but also so much devastation, will undoubtedly be a difficult process and take a long time. And we have plenty of internal as well as external enemies.

There have been many positive advances, and it is important to name them. There has been a substantial reduction in the poverty level. Hunger has diminished, decent housing has increased, and there is better attention to health and well-being. There is less illiteracy and better education at all levels. There is increased access to information and better communication. Production has gone up, and sustainable energy sources have increased. Regional organizations such as UNASUR⁵ have been established that—beyond the good intentions of assuring a region of peace, free of weapons of mass destruction, of strengthening its democratic institutions, eliminating socioeconomic inequality, etc.—have shown to be capable of mediating the problems between one country and another, and fending off coups and attempted coups. Specifically, I can mention UNASUR’s role in mediating the conflict between Venezuela and Colombia. In 2010, we added CELAC.⁶
Of course there is a lot that remains to be done: in the redistribution of wealth and attention to environmental issues, as well as to achieve a new kind of human development, popular outreach, and so forth, centered on justice and freedom, participation, and efficiency.

The various countries have also had different problems and successes. Some more than others have fallen back into old leadership styles, avoiding to talk about problems that don’t attract votes and going by that old erroneous saying that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” This has been true at the international level as well as within the country. Those who push this process forward do so with sincerity, as an example of service to the community; without hypocrisy, they inform the public truthfully, guaranteeing the quality of state agencies, their transparency and honesty. Leading isn’t about grabbing power but meeting citizens’ needs. I’m not talking about public meetings, sitting people down in large halls and telling them “follow me.” I’m talking about getting people to genuinely interact. It’s a problem of attitude and of principles.

The other day, speaking with a friend, he asked: “Aren’t we being perfectionists? The world is a mess, and in comparison we’re doing pretty well. Aren’t we maybe too ambitious?” There is no doubt that in the main the world is a mess, a tragic mess. But it’s the world we live in. We are part of it. We have to retrieve the positive things as well, those things we rarely talk about. For this very reason we have to work hard, so that we won’t succumb to disaster rather sooner than later. It’s not about constructing an exportable South American model, but about doing what’s right for us. Our relative current success opens up the possibility of working on many things we’ve never considered before. We must not frustrate hope. We must make politics something we can believe in, that people will fall in love with, and of which they will consider themselves a part.

How do I see Uruguay at the moment? I think it’s doing well, but with a few warning signs. Look, this is a small country, with a meager population and few of the major conflicts that afflict other South American countries. An “easy” country, we might say. Ours is a country with little material weight in the region (it only has 1 percent of its territory and of its population). And it’s situated between two giants. It’s a young country, profoundly republican, democratic, secular, and with a high degree of social sensibility. Without going into a lengthy history, I’ll just say that our period of modernity is so brief that almost anyone can embrace it through the stories of their parents and grandparents. That said, and without denying the much that we have done, I think we could have advanced a lot faster and better.

For example, I believe we could have moved much further along in revealing the truth about our disappeared, in improving our popular education, in reorganizing our armed forces, and in other state reforms. I don’t say any of this from a know-it-all position, but because I think the work of educating and mobilizing is possible, and because I believe there is still time to undertake that work. I don’t think the FA, with all the support it had, is currently making enough of an effort to give people
Uruguay: A Woman Remembers

135

a real voice and to promote change. Any political or ideological vacuum the FA leaves will quickly be filled with corporate and bureaucratic values. In the midst of capitalist hegemony I know this isn’t easy. But it’s necessary and I think it’s possible.

I am convinced that helping to change a society, to make it more just, more free, more fraternal, more cultured, is one of the most human and humanizing challenges we have. Aside from the fact that it is a collective effort, or maybe precisely because of that, every individual counts. As with so many other things in life, there are many situations in which a single person makes all the difference.

MR: Emilia, what scars from the war and prison remain, and how have they changed you? In Uruguay have individuals had to deal with these scars on their own, or has there been some sort of collective effort—for example group gatherings to talk about certain issues, psychotherapy, and so forth? Has your work with the families of the disappeared helped you personally in this respect?

EC: It’s true that we have known and suffered from the darkest chapters in human history, and not only because of our enemies. But I have also, like many others, known the most luminous side of people and of life itself. It is this luminosity that helps sweep away the shadows.

I have been fortunate enough to go through each of the different stages (underground, prison, exile, and return) feeling, really feeling, that I shared them with people who are fantastic. People with whom I have staunched the wounds and cultivated our shared dreams, our shared faith. We have cared for and healed ourselves as we’ve been able to do, as we’ve gone along. What else could we do at the time and in those circumstances? Of course you’re right, the families of the disappeared have helped me personally a great deal. I am very fortunate in that.

Look, I have taken testimonies and have witnessed realities completely foreign to me or to my surroundings. Nevertheless, I can’t help feeling the weight of that horror. Horror is never fleeting. It is viscous. It sticks to people, especially to those who listen to those stories. It reproduces and multiplies. And this is why it can paralyze. This is one of its intentions. We need to be careful when handling it. We mustn’t trivialize it or make it a consumer product. Horror doesn’t make people better. It diminishes them, sometimes beyond their ability to survive.

When states perpetrate horror, it is worse than almost anything else. It leaves individuals and communities defenseless, abandoned because those states always said they would protect them and made constitutional contracts to that effect. It’s a terrible thing when your own so-called power structure attacks you, betrays you. This has eroded the credibility of states as entities that are there for the common good. And this is a problem for our new democracies.

Do I have scars? I do, but who knows which I owe to the enemy, which to those who betrayed us, which to disillusionment, and which to everyday life. In my case, what I recognize is a certain intolerance of excessive noise, of everyone talking at once. And a certain fear of what they call “the rotten branch.” We have a saying
“An old monkey won’t climb a rotten branch.” I am always suspicious of rotten branches, of climbing rotten branches. What I mean is I am intolerant of people or things that appear to be what they are not.

As far as Uruguay is concerned, because of my own history I am not that up on what people have done in these areas. There is an organization of ex political prisoners that came on the scene in 2000. It does important work in the field of general reparation and supports human rights efforts. I don’t know if it specifically has psychosocial therapy, but I know it offers aid in various ways. A group of women who have been victims of sexual violence have also come together, and they have bravely started out bringing their victimizers to trial. They have a mental health component made up of very good professionals, people who are very committed. The Families don’t have group therapy. I know a lot of survivors who have gravitated toward this sort of support, but individually.

I began to work with Mothers and Families of Uruguay in 1985, when I returned to the country. We already knew each other from the federation, but now we were working together every day. Other comrades, who had come back from exile as well as those who had remained, also began to work with us. Those of us who don’t have disappeared family members form a sort of support network. We don’t make the decisions. We respect the families’ space. So I work with the Families, but what I am going to tell you now is exclusively my point of view.

We’ve been working together for a long time, based on a few simple questions: how, when, where, who, and why each disappearance took place. And two mottos: “truth and justice” and “never again.” I would like each of these questions to be able to be answered thoroughly in each and every case. I would like the impunity to end. Not only for reasons of justice, but for reasons of dignity, prevention, and the future. I would like to see a depuration of the armed forces and security forces. I would like to see legitimate procedures established in all those bodies. The struggle in our country has been long and painful. The Right, during the first administration following the dictatorship, pushed through an impunity law that we have not yet been able to reverse.

We have advanced considerably in studying the archives to which we’ve had access, but there are others that remain inaccessible. We have made many contributions to the Peace Commission and then to the Secretariat for Follow-up to the Peace Commission. We have established accords with the university, in terms of studying the archives and carrying out forensic work. We’ve also begun a bank of genetic data for the Families. Most of this work has been done at the initiative of the families. The same is true of the work we’ve been able to do around memory. In spite of all this effort, a few essential problems persist. And they are serious ones: impunity, the armed forces’ resistance to handing over information, the unwillingness of the armed forces to purify its ranks, and the inability to break with old military codes. Without the appropriate resolution to these problems, there is no guarantee of “never again.”
The Cold War is over. We have suffered the national security doctrine, in which the armed forces of our countries have acted practically as forces of occupation, and not even precisely in the service of their countries and peoples. But today there are “new enemies” on the horizon. They are terrorism, organized delinquency, and drug traffic. These are extremely amorphous categories to which a single (and arguably inadequate) answer is “war.” The militarization of Latin America and establishment of military bases in the region constitutes one of the most serious and costliest problems we face today.

The disasters of these “wars” in Colombia and Mexico, which have produced rivers of blood, are a warning to all of us. The existence of a succession of “alliances” and “security initiatives” in the northern part of Latin America and the Caribbean, and the insistence on the participation of a number of armies from these countries (including Uruguay) in the Peace Missions in Haiti, should be the target of exhaustive information and a full citizen’s debate. We also have to be concerned about the tendency toward the militarization of public safety.

In this context, and going back to your question, Uruguay should reopen a discussion of its defense policy (begun during the first FA government) within this new regional reality. We should ask ourselves if this country really needs to have armed forces. And if the answer is yes, we should clearly determine why, with what goal, what it should look like, its doctrine, its alliances, and so forth. In today’s Uruguay, not looking at this issue constitutes a danger we cannot ignore.

NOTES

1. Neo-Batlismo was what we called the policies imposed by Luis Battle Berres during and after World War II (political liberalism, import industrialization with market substitutions, etc).
2. Raúl Sendic Antonaccio (1926–1989) was a prominent Uruguayan Marxist and founder of the Tupamaros.
3. Jorge Pacheco Areco, of the Colorado Party, was president from 1967 to 1972. His administration was characterized by political violence and a suspension of constitutional safeguards.
4. The Broad Front worked steadily for years to achieve a progressive government. A center-left member of the Broad Front, Tabaré Vázquez, was elected in 2004 and assumed the presidency in 2005. His administration ran to 2010, at which time leftist guerrilla fighter José Mujica was elected by an ample margin. His administration has been considerably more progressive.
5. The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) was established in May 2008 to promote the integration of democracy, education, energy policy, infrastructure, etc. Uruguay was the ninth state to ratify the treaty.
6. The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) was established in Caracas, Venezuela in December 2011. Its main goal was to reduce U.S. influence in the area.