

In the footsteps of the Apostle



Receiving the José Martí National Journalism Award from Carlos Rafael Rodríguez for his 1989 work in television.

by Pedro Martínez Pírez

Every Cuban should be proud to be a Martiano. Martí is the surname of Cuba.

And that is what I have been since the night when, in the city of Santa Clara, guided by Ramón Pando Ferrer, I participated in the March of the Torches and we were strongly repressed by the police of the Batista dictatorship.

It was on January 27, 1953. Pando, my neighbor on San Vicente Street in Santa Clara, was also, like me, although a year older, a student in the night course for workers of the Professional School of Commerce of Santa Clara. And with José Julio Rivas Herrera, Francisco Ramos, Armando Choy, Luis Peralta and other students we opposed the military coup of March 10, 1952.

We were followers of Fidel Castro, the most distinguished opponent of the dictator Batista, and Fidel contributed to make us Martianos when he proclaimed to the world that José Martí had been the intellectual author of the historic Assault on the Moncada Barracks, in the city of Santiago de Cuba, on July 26, 1953.

In 1963, when I was on my second diplomatic mission in Chile - my first had been to Ecuador - I had the honor of accompanying the poet Nicolás Guillén at the inauguration of a school donated by Cuba to the children of the mining town of Lota.

I remember that we traveled more than five hundred kilometers to the southern region of Bio Bio under a persistent drizzle, and we stopped in the city of Concepción, where we were received by philosophy professor Enzo Mella, then an activist in solidarity with Cuba.

Enzo Mella, who was a professor at the University of Oriente, in Santiago de Cuba, was treated for cancer in Havana by the eminent Cuban oncologist Zoilo Marinello, who performed the first skin cancer operation on me in the eighties of the last century.

But the most significant part of the trip to Lota was to learn many years later, thanks to a report by Juventud Rebelde journalist Yoerky Sanchez Cuellar, that the bust of Jose Marti placed at the entrance of the school, was hidden by the inhabitants of the mining town following the military coup of Augusto Pinochet, on September 11, 1973, and put back in place after the end of the dictatorship, 17 years later. Something that a young Chilean student of the ELAM, Latin American School of Medicine, belonging to a family from the mining town of Lota, had told me a short time before.

In Chile, where I stayed for almost two years and where Ernesto, the second of my four children, was born, I was able to learn about the great admiration for José Martí of the 1945 Nobel Literature Prize winner Gabriela Mistral, to whom our Martí troubadour Teresita Fernández sang many times.

In 1982 I made my first visit to Venezuela and I took advantage of that trip on a journalistic mission, which began in Barquisimeto, capital of Lara State, to visit the Bolivar Square and there the equestrian statue of the Liberator, which was placed on November 7, 1874. José Martí was there on January 21, 1881, one day after arriving in Venezuela "without shaking off the dust of the road or asking where to eat or sleep".

I remember that, with the tape recorder that always accompanies me -until today- in my journalistic wanderings, I made a chronicle in front of the impressive monument to Bolivar -perhaps near the place where our Apostle was- and one of the old men present in the park heard me mention Cuba and asked if I was a Cuban journalist. Yes, I answered in surprise. And the man told me that in the park there was also a Venezuelan who had lost a brother in Cuba. Who is he, I asked him, and he pointed with the index finger of his right hand to the bench where the older brother of Carlos Aponte was sitting, fallen together with Antonio Guiteras in El Morrillo, Matanzas, on May 8, 1935.

I will never forget that moment of my stay in Caracas in October 1982, where I stayed at the house of Eduardo Machado, one of the founders of the Communist Party, who lived very close to Plaza Bolivar and was married to Doña Gertrudis, a very kind and revolutionary American, who prepared the place for me to sleep in the library of the residence I shared with Eduardo Machado, who, by the way, took me to meet in Caracas his friend Abelardo Raidi, dean of sports journalists in Venezuela and Latin America.

In 1983, the year of the infamous Yankee invasion of Little Grenada, I was for the second time in the land of the great Ruben Dario, another admirer of Jose Marti, whom the author of "Blue" had met in New York City in 1893.

So two leading figures of Our America and of the Spanish language, the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío and the Chilean Gabriela Mistral bluntly expressed their admiration for the universal Cuban.

Three years before meeting Rubén Darío, and also in New York City, our Apostle would meet the Ecuadorian Eloy Alfaro. Both were introduced by the Colombian José María Vargas Vilas on October 20, 1890.

Martí said that Alfaro, known as the Old Fighter, "was one of the few men of creation in America". A few months after Martí's heroic fall at Dos Ríos, Alfaro was the first President of America to advocate for Cuban independence before the Spanish colonial authorities.

I remember being invited in 1995 by the Prefecture of Pichincha to an event held at the Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana "Benjamín Carrión", in Quito, on the occasion of the Centenary of the triumph of the Alfaro Revolution. And in that event my presentation was about the historical relations between Alfaro, Martí and Antonio Maceo.

Years later, in Havana, I would suggest to that Prefecture that, in the place known as La Ciudad Mitad del Mundo, twenty kilometers north of Quito, a monument to José Martí should be erected to symbolize the Cuban hero's incessant search for the balance of the world.

I proposed by name the Cuban sculptor Andrés González González to carry out the work, something that was accepted by the Prefect of the time, and it was Armando Hart, Director of the Martí Program and the José Martí Cultural Society, who inaugurated in 2015 the beautiful Martí monument in the Ciudad Mitad del Mundo, which I was able to visit years later with Verence, one of Guayasamín's daughters.

At the end of June 2012, the VII Meeting of the World Council of the José Martí Solidarity Project was held in Quito, to which I had the honor of providing journalistic coverage. The Meeting, which was held at the headquarters of the Ecuadorian Foreign Ministry and the beautiful and impressive Chapel of Man, inaugurated by Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez on November 29, 2002, was entitled "José Martí, Eloy Alfaro and the integrationist ideal".

On Tuesday, October 23, 2012, the exact day of the 150th anniversary of the first letter of the child José Martí to his mother Leonor Pérez Cabrera, we presented at the headquarters of the Center for Martí Studies in Havana the 2013 Radio Havana Cuba pocket calendar with the image of José Martí by painter Oswaldo Guayasamín.

At that event, which was presided over by Dr. Armando Hart Dávalos, Director of the Office of the Martí Program and President of the José Martí Cultural Society, we delivered lienzographs with the beautiful portrait of Martí to the relatives of the Five Cuban Heroes, as well as to the ambassadors of the Alba-TCP countries, donated, like the calendars, by our dear friend Gabriel Navarrete Martínez, President of the Spanish Association for Culture and International Cooperation.

Another canvas print with the image of the Apostle was donated to the headquarters of the ACNU, the Cuban Association of the United Nations, then directed by Dr. Carlos Amat Forés, who had asked me for it as President of the Press Commission of the ACNU and Deputy Director of Radio Havana Cuba.

The director of the Center for Martí Studies at that time was Dr. Ana Sánchez Collazo, whom I once interviewed at her residence in El Vedado for my program ENTRE CUBANOS on Radio Habana Cuba.

In December 1996, when I was still a National Deputy in Cuba, the Guatemalan Guillermo Toriello Garrido asked me to accompany him to his country for the signing of the Peace Accords.

Former Foreign Minister Toriello, founder of the United Nations in 1945 and the only diplomat who, because he was anti-democratic, opposed the veto, asked Commander Fidel Castro that the President of the Cuban Parliament, Ricardo Alarcón, authorize me to travel with him.

And so it was that I accompanied my friend Toriello on that trip with stopovers in Panama and Costa Rica, where I was granted the visa to enter Guatemala, and Toriello his Guatemalan diplomatic passport as former foreign minister of his country. Granted by decision of the president of Guatemala, Álvaro Arzú.

Toriello traveled, as I did, with a Cuban diplomatic passport, since he had settled in Havana in 1981, was the President and founder of the Anti-imperialist Tribunal of Our America, and had many recognitions in Cuba, one of them from Cuban Foreign Minister Raul Roa Garcia, who dedicated one of his books entitled "Return to the Dawn" to him with these words: "To the first Chancellor of the Dignity of Our America".

He told me that he came to Cuba for the first time as a sportsman to the II Central American and Caribbean Games, held in Havana in 1930, and that his first act of solidarity with the Cuban students was to bandage his hand so as not to give it to the dictator Machado, who received the delegations.

I had a close and fruitful relationship with Dr. Toriello, and had accompanied him to Nicaragua, Grenada, Brazil and Libya. He had just turned 85 years old, and always repeated that he had been born in Guatemala on the eleventh, eleventh, eleventh.

For some years I was the follower of the Venezuelan journalist Freddy Balzán, director of the Revista Soberanía, official organ of the Tribunal presided by Toriello.

In his house in Havana, located in the Municipality of Playa, on 62nd Street at the corner of Novena, where I shared many times with him, he showed me a replica of the Granma yacht given to me by his friend, Commander Fidel Castro.

I remember that, on his 80th birthday, celebrated at his home, the Cuban Revolution singer Carlos Puebla, whom I had met in Quito in 1961, when in my presence Oswaldo Guayasamín made a portrait of him, which, by the way, illustrates the 2023 pocket calendar of Radio Habana Cuba, edited in Madrid thanks to the solidarity of the Spanish friend Gabriel Navarrete Martínez.

There were no diplomatic relations between Cuba and Guatemala when the Peace Accords were signed on December 29, 1996, and I remember that in my presence Toriello said to Arzú: "Oscarito, when are you going to reestablish relations with Cuba?" To which the first Guatemalan president replied, "Very soon, my friend Guillermo". And so it was.

I remember having interviewed several of the leaders of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, the night of the signing of the Peace Accords, and that very close to where we sat with Toriello, in the courtyard of the Presidency building, was Rigoberta Menchú, who three years earlier had received the Nobel Peace Prize, and was one of the personalities who posed for the painter Oswaldo Guayasamín.

We had interviewed Rigoberta by telephone from Radio Habana Cuba, and we did it again after Toriello's death in Havana on February 24, 1997, a little more than a month after our return from Guatemala.

With Guillermo Toriello we toured all the sites related to José Martí in Guatemala, including the Masonic Lodge No. 1, which bears the name of the Apostle in a central area of the Guatemalan capital.

José Martí was twenty-four years old when he arrived in Guatemala from Mexico in 1877. Shortly after arriving in the capital of the country of the Quetzal, the Apostle went to meet his compatriot José María Izaguirre, who directed the Normal School. Izaguirre hosted him and gave him a job at the School as a teacher of Literature courses.

By the end of May Martí was hired by the San Carlos University of Guatemala, where he worked as a professor of Philosophy and Letters and had links with other Cuban intellectuals, among them José Joaquín Palma, author of the lyrics of the national anthem of Guatemala.

I recall that in 1988 I made one of my 42 programs ANGULO ANCHO ANCHO, for Cuban television, dedicated to Guatemala, and I invited Frank Fernandez to play on his piano, as if it were a marimba, the notes of the precious Guatemalan national anthem. And the great Maestro did it.

The truth is that the experience in Guatemala was very enriching for the Apostle. There he became a teacher and had a beautiful romance with the Girl of Guatemala, to whom he dedicated one of his Versos Sencillos. He wrote the essay GUATEMALA and his anti-imperialist feelings were strengthened, as well as his knowledge about the indigenous populations of Our America. The Guatemalan dictatorship that provoked Martí's departure did not prevent the Apostle from defining that land as "the hospitable, rich and

frank Guatemala".

I owe it to Toriello to have traveled to Guatemala and to know there, with him, the main Marti sites, complemented years later by the Cuban sculptor Andrés González González, who erected in the Guatemalan capital a great monument to the Apostle of the Cuban independence.

And to my sister Igna Sofía, Teresita Fernández's classmate, I thank her for having known the city of Montecristi, in the Dominican Republic, where Martí signed the historic Manifesto together with Dominican Máximo Gómez, a document that served as the basis for the program of the Cuban Revolution for independence.

Igna Sofia, born in Santa Clara on May 17, 1932, has among her historical merits to have been the confirmation goddaughter of the revolutionary leader Antonio Guiteras, friend of our father Enrique Martínez Pérez. And to have always participated in Havana in the Nation and Emigration Encounters, in one of which she fulfilled her dream of greeting Commander Fidel Castro.

I remember that from the school founded in Santiago de los Caballeros by my sister -now deceased-- I left by road one election Sunday in the Dominican Republic, on a journey of more than 100 kilometers with friends listening to Radio Habana Cuba to visit the house where Máximo Gómez and José Martí met, and that the interview I was given on Radio Montecristi was reported by a Cuban resident in eastern Cuba.

On May 5, 2017, the President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa Delgado, received the José Martí Order from the hands of his Cuban counterpart Raúl Castro in a ceremony held at the Palace of the Revolution in Havana. "All my life I have been a Martiano", said Correa in this, his last visit to Cuba as Ecuador's first president.

I did not include in this historical account the interview I did in Paris with our Ambassador to France, in 1988, because French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac was opposed to the placement of a bust of Martí in Paris. On that occasion I also interviewed our Ambassador to UNESCO, Alfredo Guevara, who acknowledged that Cuban officials in France had not done all the dissemination that the work of the Cuban hero deserved.

I will never forget that the French in charge of the Eiffel Tower did not know what José Martí said about that emblematic tower of the French capital: "The whole world is now going as if moving on the sea, with all human peoples on board, and of the ship of the world, the tower is the mast!"

And one of the most supportive Spaniards with Cuba, Gabriel Navarrete Martínez, always qualified him with Martian words by identifying him as "the good and useful Spaniard" who for more than twenty years has financed and edited in Madrid the pocket calendars of Radio Havana Cuba.

Honor, honor, was the distinction given to me by Dr. Armando Hart in 2009, in the theater of the José Martí Memorial, and six years later, at the headquarters of the José Martí Cultural Society, the distinction UTILIDAD DE LA VIRTUD (UTILITY OF VIRTUE).

They accompany me on the long march in the footsteps of the Apostle.

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