

Pinochet could not silence Prensa Latina



By Omar Sepúlveda and Jorge Luna / Prensa Latina contributor and journalist

Santiago de Chile (Prensa Latina)-- Prensa Latina's bureau in Chile was assaulted by military coup leaders on September 11, 1973, 50 years ago, but its voice in the service of truth could never be silenced.

Living through that coup, as well as the almost three years of destabilization of Salvador Allende's government, and recounting those experiences half a century later is, more than a personal testimony, a demand for justice and memory for thousands of victims of the Chilean dictatorship.

After 50 years and for the first time, Omar Sepúlveda, Chilean, and Jorge Luna, Peruvian, then young reporters of Prelagoch (internal identification of our correspondent's office), recalled, from Chile and from Cuba, via Internet, some moments of that day.

The office was raided by 21 soldiers -coming from the bombed Palacio de La Moneda- who had just destroyed the adjoining headquarters of the magazine Punto Final, directed by Manuel Cabieses, and who, with gunshots, came to our door. They demanded that we get off "pa'l truck", which would take us to who knows where.

During that military operation, in which we refused to leave the correspondent's office, there were, besides our Chief Correspondent Jorge Timossi, an Argentine journalist and writer, our colleagues Pedro Lobaina and Mario Mainadé, Cubans, and Orlando Contreras, a Chilean who had arrived in the country only the day before.

MINUTES BEFORE THE RAID

The only woman on the team, Chilean journalist Elena Acuña, had to reluctantly leave the office on the instructions of Timossi, who suspected an imminent raid and, to protect her, asked her to save agency

documents to be sent to headquarters in Havana.

She successfully carried out this dangerous mission, for she had to walk in front of the main entrance of the besieged Government Palace, while a brief cessation of the aerial bombardment took place.

Timossi spoke by telephone with Allende's advisors surrounded in La Moneda in flames and we transmitted the reports to our correspondent in Buenos Aires (Prelabaires), the Cuban journalist José Bodes Gómez, founder of the agency, who relayed them to Havana.

SOLIDARITY

Prelagoch was the object of numerous gestures of solidarity by many Chileans concerned for our safety before and during the raid.

Jorge Luna: I always remember Augusto Carmona (El Pelao) and his partner Lucía Sepúlveda, editors of Punto Final, who arrived early to offer their collaboration, despite the danger our correspondent was in.

On several occasions we described it as "the mousetrap", since we had instructions not to resist nor to leave the office (?), something apparently contradictory but which, in the end, saved our lives.

When Allende's death was confirmed - news that nobody wanted to believe and even less to transmit - Timossi asked his friends to withdraw to avoid greater risks, but we had photos of them, who that same day went underground and joined the anti-fascist resistance.

Four years later, "El Pelao" was murdered in the streets of Santiago.

Timossi also told the members of the team that whoever wanted to withdraw should do so at that moment. No one withdrew.

THE RAID

The soldiers came in shouting and pushing and shoving and put us against the wall, hands on our heads, with their rifles on our backs, in an aggressive mock execution. After searching us, they ordered us to sit on the floor in different corners.

Another time, they put Lobaina, the most phlegmatic of us, and Mainadé, the most witty, as "human shields" on the balcony during a prolonged gun battle. They also did it with Contreras, who warned "Hey, here they are going to hit us" (the bullets), a claim that the soldiers ignored.

Suspecting that it was a hand grenade, the soldiers took from Mainadé an obsolete hearing aid, with which he was attenuating an old chronic deafness.

ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA

The monochord sound of the teletype and the perforated yellow tapes -which for the military were something like a transmission in code- frightened the troops and their sergeant pretended to relax his anger and smashed a portrait of Commander Ernesto Che Guevara against a chair.

Sepúlveda could not contain his indignation and advanced determined to confront the soldier. But, someone shouted, "Omar, it's just a picture!" he restrained his impulse.

Omar Sepúlveda: With time I came to understand that my reaction had put us all in danger, but at that instant I responded to what I considered an insult to the memory of Che. When I saw his portrait destroyed on the ground, I acted and did not think, which could have cost us dearly.

I don't remember who shouted the saving cry. What is certain is that it prevented the situation from escalating. The same sergeant then decided to use me as a "guide", at rifle point, for his tour of the two floors of the office, in search of weapons, while the others were still sitting on the floor with rifles pointed at their heads.

THE PHOTOS

Jorge Luna: Omar, your agitated dialogue with the soldiers in the darkroom of our photo lab was also dangerous. I could see them arguing, but I couldn't hear them. Omar Sepúlveda: Someone said that there were photos being developed, so I shouldn't turn on the light. The military, in the dark, searched and broke everything. I didn't know it, but there was a pistol hidden in the safety lamp in the dark room and, if it had been turned on, its black silhouette would have been drawn against the orange plastic screen.

So someone who did know about it insisted that I not turn it on. We only learned about the gun later, after the patrol was ordered to leave the office and took Timossi to the Ministry of Defense, summoned there together with other representatives of the foreign press, to impose them of the information restrictions. I also remember Timossi's anger with you that day, perhaps because of the tension of the moment, while you were taking pictures from the 11th floor balcony with half your body exposed. Jorge Luna: I see you remember that it cost me a big scolding from Timossi. He almost took my camera away from me.

That morning, I took out my "Pentax" with telephoto lens and, in a hurry, I recorded a military operation on Ahumada Street, including a Carabiniero lying on a car while shooting in any direction. I saw that image published later in several media.

As an amateur photographer, I learned a lot from the photojournalists who worked in Chile at different stages, such as the Cubans Tomasito García and Pablito Pildain, the Uruguayan Naúl Ojeda and the Chilean Guillermo (el Búfalo) Saavedra, all very professional and, let's say, "all-terrain".

Later, we heard the low passes of Hawker-Hunter planes over downtown Santiago, but -from the balcony- we could not see them. So we went out into the hallway, in front of the elevators, where there was a window with a view of the roofs of the buildings around La Moneda -two blocks away- waiting for the planes

.At the sudden roar of the second or third pass, I shot in a burst, without knowing exactly what I had captured. I do not forget the columns of smoke over the Chilean government palace, something unusual in the history of Latin America.

NO ONE SLEPT

That night, the two of us had to stand first watch at the front door of the office, so that the other colleagues could sleep at least for a little while. We were haunted by the startling noise of the building's elevator motor, located on the top floor, amidst the silence of a building that at that hour was supposed to be empty.

Apparently, some tenants, fearful of the military searches, sought refuge in different apartments and floors without leaving the building, known as Union Central 1010, today renamed Bombero Ossa.

Bursts of machine guns, isolated gunshots, sirens wailing and the mysterious movement of vehicles with their lights off in the middle of the curfew, disturbed a long night in which none of the journalists could sleep.

THE NEIGHBORS

On Wednesday the 12th we had our first bite to eat since Monday, thanks to "Arturo", a Guatemalan militant of the Chilean resistance, hidden on another floor of the building, who surprised us with a large casserole of rice with lentils and a box of 24 small bottles of Coca Cola.

We did not know (nor did we ask) where the donation had come from, but -sitting on the floor around the pot- we devoured what -half jokingly and half seriously- we called the "last supper". We were equally surprised by the fleeting and supportive visit of some high-flying "ladies of the night", discreetly practicing their profession in another apartment on the same floor, who arrived with cups of hot tea, outraged by the destruction of Punto Final and worried about us.

THE DEPARTURE

On Thursday the 13th, more than 48 hours after the raid, we continued to transmit news messages by telephone to Prelabaires.

Then, we were told that we would be transferred to the Cuban diplomatic headquarters, some 15 kilometers away, to eventually leave in the evening to be expelled to Havana.

OMAR SEPÚLVEDA: That afternoon I phoned my parents and my then girlfriend - today my wife - to say goodbye.

A colonel and his escort (in civilian clothes) arrived at nightfall, together with the Cuban consul Jorge Pollo. My five companions could leave, but I was not on the list. The alternative was to stay in the office or go to the embassy as an asylum seeker.

Timossi asked me to be in charge of closing the correspondent's office and to finish off the support staff.

Minutes later, in front of the elevator, I said goodbye to my companions, one by one, almost in silence.

We shared the same emotion, but mine broke after a few seconds, when successive bursts of gunfire thundered the street and the night...

I only heard from them two days later, on Saturday the 15th, in a "window" of the curfew, I was able to walk about 30 blocks to my house and that night I saw on television the departure of my colleagues to Cuba, where they would continue working in Prensa Latina.

Excitement turned to joy. In the following weeks, I helped Elena (Acuña) and her family to leave the country and then, with the valuable help of Manuel Villar, a young Chilean teletypist who became an excellent journalist for Prensa Latina, I dedicated myself to fulfill the task entrusted to me: to temporarily close the correspondent's office.

Jorge Luna: You and I were the rookies of the team and we had to cover street events, marches, protests, mobilizations and even bombings and attacks. We also participated in almost all of Allende's political acts and in the visit to Chile of Commander in Chief Fidel Castro. That is how we became friends and comrades.

The departure was very tense. Although the immediate future was uncertain for those of us in Chilean military intelligence cars on our way to the Cuban embassy, we all made the trip thinking about the risks you would run in Chile.

Fortunately, you managed to get out of Chile and, soon after, you were able to leave and rejoin -for more than 20 years- the work of Prensa Latina in several Latin American places.

THE AGENCY THAT COULD NOT BE SILENCED

As the only survivors of those events, we hope that this dialogue will contribute to the rich historical memory of Prensa Latina and that it will serve as a four-handed tribute to our colleagues, now deceased, who deserve honor and glory.

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