

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7528>



Obituary

Hasta siempre Helena!

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

Publication date: Monday 21 February 2022

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Helena, as she was known to so many, was one of the mainstays of La Brèche, bookshop of the LCR and then of the NPA, for over forty years. The bookshop was a necessary passage when arriving at the Paris headquarters - so Helena knew comrades from the Paris region, from the other regions of France and from many other countries who came there (Impasse Gumenée, rue de Tunis, rue Taine, even a brief period at Télégraphe) for meetings, to fetch their weekly papers and leaflets... She welcomed everybody, always prepared to advise on books to read, to take an interest in political activities. Helena always remained discreet about what she had suffered as a political prisoner after the 1973 coup in Chile. She told the stories that would make people chuckle about exile in Ireland or being a cleaning lady for the Mitterrands. But the first many comrades heard about her imprisonment was in the brief [film](#) Olivier Besancenot made with her in 2021. Yet she was one of those whose testimony was submitted in the case against Pinochet in London.

Her companion Norman recounts their life from the coup until the end. Michael Lowy pays tribute to her militant commitment since her exile in France notably in the Latin America exile work, a point developed in his tribute at her funeral.

Other tributes (in French) can be found on [ESSF](#). [IVP].

Tribute to Helena

Helena and I met while we were both working in the National Health Service in Chile, and we were also trade unionists. Union activity was her first experience, on the way to an acute awareness of the inequalities that divide the population of capitalist societies and of the need to fight to put an end to them.

The conflagration

The time when Helena became politically conscious was not a normal time. A process of radicalization was setting Latin America ablaze. In Chile, the experience of Christian Democracy had for a time concealed this evolution and distorted the appreciation of this process of radicalization. But despite the financial efforts of American imperialism to help the success of this reformist experiment, proposed as an alternative to neutralize the winds of change blowing from the Caribbean, the demands for radical change were confirmed during the year 1970.

But radicalization, naturally accompanied by the aspiration for more democracy, also came up against the bureaucratic behaviour of traditional organizations.

Our small organization had made a good start in establishing itself in our sector of activity. In addition, we had just received a very important influx of new energies. With the split in the MIR, caused by militaristic deviations and the total absence of democracy, the October Revolutionary Tendency decided to join the International, and merged with the existing section.

At the same time, Helena and I decided to share our lives.

It was within this framework, an organization still of modest size, but capable of developing, a political capital anchored in the history of the labour movement, that, when the time came, she was able to choose the Fourth International as the organization where she wanted to be active.

Our respective origins, categorically rejecting the climate imposed by bureaucratically distorted operating methods, stimulating the development of frank camaraderie and critical vivacity, shaped the beginnings of her militant experience and never left her.

Prison

We developed our activity, perceiving the danger.

The blindness of the traditional leaderships, all opposing obstacles to mobilization, to the accomplishment of the programme which they carried, provoked the bloody abortion of the process in September 1973.

Repression came down on us, fierce, seeking to eradicate to the root the causes of the fear experienced by the propertied classes.

We were not spared.

Helena thus had— dramatically —in this new experience the opportunity to test the solidity of the convictions she had acquired. And she was able to show exemplary courage and dignity.

Neither prison nor torture managed to undermine her confidence in the validity of the fight in which she had chosen to participate. Neither the brutality nor the vexations to which women were primarily victims undermined her certainties. On the contrary, she became a support, a source of encouragement for her fellow prisoners.

She was freed. I was sent to a concentration camp, in the middle of the desert reputed to be the driest in the world, Helena became my only means of communication with the world that existed beyond the barbed wire and the minefields.

More than 2,000 kilometres separated us. And she managed to overcome this distance to bring me her comfort and the supplies that could make our life as prisoners easier. And she did this several times.

Ireland

A programme for the release and exile of a certain number of political prisoners was then drawn up by humanitarian organizations, with the support of the UN. No one knows why some and not others found themselves on the list of those who had to go into exile in exchange for their release.

We had already had to regret the "disappearance" of the mother of my daughter Natalia, which had led to the breaking of all ties with Natalia. We didn't know where she was. For her mother we suspected. But for her, we had no hypothesis.

I knew Helena was inclined to stay. There were many reasons to. But the danger was too present. My demand not to leave without her was finally accepted. Then the question was: where to go. The choices were limited given the number of candidate countries at the start.

And it was Ireland: an unexpected choice, under pressure.

From our first stammerings in English, we proposed to advance towards the construction of a movement of solidarity with the victims of repression in Chile. The Irish Communist Party and its Official Sinn Fein allies favoured bureaucratic methods that allowed the leaders responsible for the Chilean debacle to be supported without having to be held accountable. We then began a very fruitful collaboration with our comrades in the Revolutionary Marxist Group, Irish section of the Fourth International, but also with forces like the Socialist Workers Movement, which enabled us to counter and, in many cases, defeat the orientation of the reformist bureaucracies.

Limerick, Shannon, Cork, Galway, Dublin, Belfast, and I forget some of the other places, saw the creation of democratic structures, where the debate was open to all.

Again, it was Helena who did most to make the work of coordination progress.

Households

The experience of exile continued in France where, after a long year without papers, we succeeded in obtaining recognition of our condition as political refugees. A year where we worked, like all undocumented migrants, in jobs reserved for this category of people: she was a cleaning lady, I was a handyman.

But not just any cleaning lady. A job offer taped to the window at the butcher's led a friend to suggest that Helena go and have a look. It was 22 rue de Bièvre. The interview had a positive result, Helena got the job. Neither she, having just arrived in France, nor the friend, certainly not very politicized, knew that the woman who had just hired Helena was Danielle Mitterrand and that this address was François Mitterrand's official residence. And Helena's main activity was going to be, precisely, cleaning François Mitterrand's office.

And there you have it, a successful career as a cleaning lady. As time passed, her French improved, facilitating her communication with the Mitterrand family. And, when she left this job, she was able to maintain very good relations with the family, in particular with Danielle; in full knowledge, for their part, of Helena's political activism.

But this gleaming career (it made everything shine!) was no longer justified once our situation was regularized. Now we could resume a normal life. And act openly.

Which we did.

La Brèche

Just at that time, the future bookshop "La Brèche" was circulating a job offer. Helena applied and was accepted. And, in the year 1979, she began a new career.

Hasta siempre Helena!

Quickly, her training as a librarian and statistician led her to propose new working methods, which, fitting into a real rescue plan, would enable the bookstore to overcome a very serious crisis, which led to fears of its disappearance.

And from that moment, until her death, she was committed to bringing this experience to life.

Associations, groups and various organizations, even political parties, not having at their disposal the expertise accumulated by "La Brèche", were able to benefit from it.

The successes of the bookstore, during the summer schools of the LCR and then the NPA, were, in large part, the result of her flair in the selection of titles to offer. That flair was also present in the proposals she made to the various clients.

Not that this was an individual success. It was teamwork, where her qualities contributed to collective success.

Until her death, the bookshop was for her a combat post, a tool in the struggle to change society. A combat that she did not give up, except when she was forced to by the disease which killed her.

Helena joined the ranks of our organization, suffered the consequences of this choice, participated directly in the efforts to build a better world in countries from which she did not originate, because, as an internationalist, for her humanity was one.

And she did it out of love. For the poor, for those who suffer from all kinds of deprivation.

For her comrades, for her children and her grandchildren.

For her friends.

Norman

How sad... We have shared so much, for almost half a century, hopes and disappointments. The Latina cell of the League was you, the Cercle José Carlos Mariategui was you. Helena *querida*, you will be sorely missed...

You left us when Chile had just got rid of Pinochetism, you would have liked to celebrate that with us. You were the living soul of La Brèche and the summer universities, and you always remained faithful to the dreams of your revolutionary socialist youth in Santiago.

Hasta siempre, Helena! Venceremos!

Michael (Löwy)

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.