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Obituary

Luis Sepulveda, revolutionary activist and Chilean writer, has died from Covid-19

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Luis Sepulveda died on Thursday 16 April in Oviedo (Asturias, in the Spanish state) of Covid-19, which he had contracted at the end of February during a congress of writers in Portugal. Sepulveda was a great writer and his works, translated into more than 60 languages, have enjoyed worldwide success.

Luis Sepulveda was also an activist. Member of the Chilean Communist Party from the age of 12, he quickly moved towards a more revolutionary commitment. In recent years, he had moved away from the debates on the socialist and revolutionary left. Nevertheless he was also very close to us because he had participated, in practice and with arms, in all the debates of the revolutionary movement from the beginning of the 1970s to the mid-1980s.

The origins of his commitment

Luis Sepulveda was born on October 4, 1949 in Ovalle (Chile). Grandson of an Andalusian anarchist (on the paternal side), who had been forced to flee Spain to go into exile in Ecuador and then in Chile, and of a Mapuche Indian chief from Chile (on his mother's side), he signed up from the age of 12 with the Communist Youth. While being an activist, he continued his studies and started to publish poetry texts from the age of 17.

Luis Sepulveda did not talk much about his student years. He is said to have been taken on by the Stasi (East German secret service) and to have undergone military training. In any case, when Popular Unity led by Salvador Allende took power in 1971, he was no longer a member of the CP (he had been expelled in 1968) but was active in the left tendency of the Socialist Party, "Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional" (National Liberation Army), which was close to the MIR (Movement of the Revolutionary Left, led by Miguel Enriquez). He was part of the GAP, the corps of armed bodyguards of President Salvador Allende (1908-1973) and went underground for almost two years to fight against the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet installed following the coup d'état of 11 September 1973. [1] Denounced to the authorities, he was sentenced to 28 years in prison for treason and conspiracy, then deprived of his nationality.

Thanks to a broad international campaign led by Amnesty International Germany, he was released in 1977 in exchange for exile in Sweden. He found a way out of this exile and became a vagabond in Latin America. He stayed for more than a year with the Shuar Indians in Ecuador [2] before going to Colombia where there was a big campaign in support of the struggle of the Sandinistas to liberate Nicaragua. In 1979, he was a member of the Simon Bolivar Brigade of Internationalist Volunteers (BSB). After the joy of victory, the members of the brigade were asked to behave themselves and not to be involved in the ongoing revolution. He was therefore imprisoned in Managua before being expelled to Europe. He was extremely bitter at this but it did not shake his commitment to be on the side of the oppressed.

The armed activist

The political trajectory of Luis Sepulveda who, to my knowledge, was never a "Trotskyist" crisscrossed the history of our movement. The experience of Popular Unity in Chile (1971-1973) impressed us directly by its achievements and the popular mobilization it aroused. The reformist parties in France (the Socialists and Communists) took it as an example for the peaceful implementation of their "Common Programme" by keeping quiet about the popular

mobilization, the self-organization of the masses and the threats of a military coup in Chile. For our part, we insisted on a total takeover of the economy and the arming of militias to protect the process. The Popular Unity government was deeply divided and did not take the necessary measures so as not to break with the Chilean Christian Democracy and not to frighten imperialism. Moscow and its minions did not want the revolution while Allende was more sensitive to the movements of the masses and the pressures on his left. It was in this context that the GAP, the armed protection militia of Allende, was formed.

Luis Sepulveda, because of his military training, was a member. These few hundred “soldiers” of the people understood that the democratic promises of the army were only a sham. Alas, courage cannot replace a strategy of confrontation and victory against reactionary forces. These courageous activists paid for it with their lives, torture and imprisonment. [3]

Luis Sepulveda did not forget and when in 1979 he again found the possibility of a revolution; he took part in it with arms in hand alongside the FSLN in Nicaragua and he returned victorious to the liberated capital. Once the victory was won, he sided with the comrades of the BSB who wanted to continue the revolution, to take total control of the economy of the country and not to start a new Chile. Once again, he was not listened to and was expelled in rather sordid conditions with the other foreign members of the brigade. He then declared: Once again, a beautiful revolution ends in hell. Then he headed for Germany and Hamburg.

A fantastic storyteller who continued to resist

In Germany, he met his new partner, a nurse, with whom he had three children. To put food on the table, he wrote for various German and French newspapers and eventually settled in Asturias, in the north of Spain. A region of which he praised the “tradition of political struggle established by the miners and the brotherhood which reigns there”. A region that suited him perfectly, where he resumed his work as a writer.

From his first novel published in 1992, *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*, success was there. The story of Antonio José Bolívar, an old man who knows all the secrets of the Amazon rainforest and its inhabitants, the people of the Shuars, was translated into 60 languages and even adapted for the cinema. From then on, his work would be marked by the experience of exile and his struggles for human rights and for ecology.

In 1996, he published a travelogue, *Patagonia Express* which recounts a crossing from America to Andalusia. There followed *Desencuentros* (1997) and *Historias marginales* (2001).

In 2009, true to his commitments and his battles against dictatorships, Sepulveda “returned” to Chile with *La sombra de lo que fuimos*. He recounts the reunion in Santiago of three former militants returning from exile thirty-five years after the coup d'état by Pinochet, determined to take part in a final revolutionary action. The writer then declared on the radio station France Culture: *Literature, sometimes, becomes the shadow of memory. Only what exists has a shadow and therefore in this sense, literature is the shadow of what is really happening. Literature serves as a reminder of what happened and we are not going to accept an easy solution, like amnesties, for example, or the fact of forgetting in order to move ahead.*

But the best tool in literature to continue the fight against imperialism, capitalism and its monsters and stand on the side of the losers, the anonymous and the forgotten in history, is obviously the thriller. Through the thriller and a romantic alter ego, Juan Belmonte, a former Chilean GAP and Nicaraguan BSB, the writer settles his accounts with his lifelong enemies and with his memories. In *The Name of a Bullfighter* (1994), then with *El Fin de la Historia*,

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(2017), Belmonte, retired from business, returns to Chile and finds former Stasi and former torturers of the Chilean junta as well as those who scorned the market economy “here, there and everywhere”.

Finally, to be complete and because “To tell the story is to resist”, Luis Sepulveda also wrote for young people with *The Story of a Seagull and the Cat Who Taught Her to Fly* (1996) and *Historia de un perro llamado Leal* (2016).

The tragedy of this Covid death is that the bookshops are closed. The bookshops that the Chilean cherished.

We'll get them, Luis!

Only the titles for books published in English translation are given in English.

PS:

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[1] Pinochet died in his bed in 2006 without having been put on trial or convicted. The dictatorship has still not really been dismantled, but there have been huge mobilisations in Chile over the last year.

[2] An experience from which he drew inspiration to write his first novel, *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*.

[3] The first companion of Sepulveda was brutally tortured and left for dead. They did not meet again until the 1990s.