

Oswaldo Bayer: rebel with a cause

Oswaldo Bayer and Silvina Frieria

“I’d like to have been an anarchist like Severino Di Giovanni, but I’m not cut out for it”, says Bayer.

The door of “the shack” opens slowly with a slight creaking sound. The camera pans slowly across the twinkling eyes of Oswaldo Bayer, framed by bushy eyebrows, ever-vigilant for signs of trouble, his face framed by cotton-white hair and beard. When he invites us into the narrow hall of his home in the Belgrano district, a hall narrowed even more by the stacks of books and files accumulated by the writer, there is a fear that these precariously balanced columns may be about to collapse. “Now that would be a death to dream of, to die buried by books”, Oswaldo jokes as he heads for the kitchen in search of the inevitable bottle of Campari. Watching the 82 year old walk with an agility that elegantly shuns any symptom of age, it is impossible not to be struck by what Oswaldo Soriano once said: “Bayer is a tough bone to gnaw on. If it wasn’t for him, forgetfulness would be so much easier.” Nobody has done more than Oswaldo Bayer to expose the killers, the executioners operating from positions of authority. Alone, this ageing, beloved scamp has, with an enthusiasm still undiminished, spoken up for the humiliated and insulted, the people who have always been ready to take to the streets and were slaughtered for their pains, treated like criminals, tortured, spirited away and dumped in common graves. Nobody can equal Bayer when it comes to exposing the viciousness visited especially upon anarchists, or the lies and demonisation peddled by the mass media. The Página/12 publishing imprint about to start publication of his Complete Works, eleven books to be issued at fortnightly intervals, on Sundays, through until this November [2009]. The series will open with the first volume of La Patagonia Rebelde/Rebel Patagonia, a painstaking investigation into the ferocious repression and slaughter carried out by the Argentine army during the strikes in Santa Cruz province in 1921. “Seeing all your books published in a country that used to persecute you is akin to dying and going to heaven”, Bayer volunteers, raising his glass of Campari.

“Real life can be a fantasy world, you know: when I think that I was on the hit list of the Triple A [death squad], how my books were banned, how I was driven into exile for eight years and now here are my complete works about to be issued. I’d like the price to be kept very affordable, somewhere between 10 and 18 pesos, now that books have become so expensive”, the author stresses. “I am deeply thankful to fate, given that the really deserving are my dear dead friends Rodolfo Walsh, Paco Urondo and Haroldo Conti.”

Q. Can you tell us about the research that led to your writing of the first volume of La Patagonia Rebelde?

A. It was very tough but at the same time a real passion. I had a stroke of luck vital for any researcher: every last one of them was still alive, except for the shooting victims and Lieutenant-Colonel Varela. The soldiers that carried out the shootings were still alive, class of 1900, and I started in 1969, so they were 69 years old at that point. The NCOs the officers, the estancia-owners, the Radical politicians like Senator Bartolomé Pérez (he was 84) were still alive. And many an eye-witness to these events was still alive. So I started off with the idea of writing a single volume and finished up writing a four volume work. Furthermore, General Gugliamelli, who was in charge at the Army Further Studies Centre, let me have all the material held by the Army. True, I came across many a person who was unwilling to talk and who asked why I was “raking this all up again” and I could see the climate of fear in society. The troopers, on the other hand, were keen to have their say because they had not been able to talk about it for forty years. Their families had been preventing them, telling them that they should never tell anyone that they were the shooters because then people were going to despise them. Then up pops a historian eager for knowledge and many of them opened up and let out everything they had been wanting to say for so many years.

Q. Where did this interest of yours in the Patagonian strikes come from? From your journalistic activities, perhaps?

A. It goes back to my boyhood years. My parents had been living in Rio Gallegos at the time in question. My father had never been able to get over the shootings and how nobody had ever said a thing about them, so my interest started right there. I had already published my first book Severino Di Giovanni, which had been a success, much commented upon and a best-seller and I threw myself into investigating the happenings in Patagonia. I had not done so before then because I had to travel down to Santa Cruz and that was hard because I was working. So I travelled down there for the holidays and stayed three months. I'm delighted to say that these days all the mass graves are marked: decency has won through at last. The trade unionists shot, the ones that lifted their heads above the parapet to speak for the workers all have a monument to them in Santa Cruz, starting with José Font aka Facón Grande who has a priceless monument just as you come into Jaramillo, on the spot where he was gunned down. The secondary school in the town of Gobernador Gregores has been named after José Font following a vote by the pupils, their parents and teachers. How democratic is that? By contrast, those behind the repression have no plaque commemorating them.

The mischievous twinkle in Osvaldo's eye darts across the room lightning quick as if he were delving into his memories for snapshots (...) “My books were burned, the three first volumes of *La Patagonia rebelde* .. by Lieutenant-Colonel Gorleri ‘on behalf of God, fatherland and family’. Nothing was ever done to the book-burners; no compensation was ever offered to the writers whose books were burned, no suit ever

brought by the writers whose books were burned and no compensation ever paid to the publisher (...) The very first thing democratic Germany did for persecuted writers was to republish their burned books, pay them compensation and offer them some cultural or educational appointment, whatever their preference, and compensate the publishers. But there was none of that here in Argentina, as if the book-burning had 'good grounds'. There was utter contempt shown for the exiles and President Alfonsín spoke, not about exiles, but about those who "escaped".

Q. At what point did you realise that your work was tending to vindicate the anarchists, reconstruct their lives and restore their dignity?

A. As my research proceeded and chiefly in the case of Severino Di Giovanni, I realised that what the press said and what intellectuals like Ernesto Sábato and Beatriz Guido were saying about him was a lie. I crossed swords with Sábato because in the foreword to his *On Heroes and Tombs* he stated that Severino hung out in night clubs and wore silk shirts, which were the dearest you could get back then as well as the most macho. I dropped him a line to let him know that Severino always lived poorly, like a workman, and that the silk shirt came about because four anarchists carried out an expropriation at Gath & Chaves and made off with 25 boxes of shirts. All of them silk. So that the anarchists took to wearing silk shirts. I also pointed out to him that the bit about the night clubs was not true either. Beatriz Guido stated that Severino hid his bombs "inside his grand piano". I told her that she was way off there because he had never had a piano nor did he know how to play one. Guido then phoned me and, being very caustic, told me: "We writers enjoy freedom of the imagination. Don't you understand that what I write was poetic licence?" I told her that I did, but that in that she ought to have made changes to the name at least, for the sake of Severino's children. Whereupon she said to me: "Do you know what you are? An ass." And then she hung up (Laughs).

Q. How come the anarchists inspired so much fear?

A. Anarchists carried out expropriations, something that neither the socialists nor the communists did. They carried them out in order to publish books, newspapers, pamphlets and, mainly (we have historic proof of this and I have spelled it out in *Los anarquistas expropiadoras/ The Anarchist Expropriators*) for the upkeep of the families of those deported under Law 4144, the Residency Law [introduced in 1902]. All those families were left behind without a penny and that included the children. And then there was also help for the prisoners' families. The anarchists described themselves as "libertarian socialists" and the highly embourgeoisé socialists shunned them, arguing that one must never resort to crime. The communists also criticised them openly, arguing that these attacks and expropriations were giving the people's revolutionary movement a bad name.

Somebody knocks on the door rather than ringing the bell. The murmur of adolescent voices is heard. “Forgive me just right now. Later”, he says like some anarchist and die-hard pacifist grandfather showing understanding for their juvenile pranks. “They went away, scratching their heads”, he says as he returns. “The other day two lads in their twenties rang my bell. ‘Listen, boss, do you have mines in there?’ they asked me, spotting the poster that says El Tugurio (The Shack). Deadpan, I told them: ‘Nothing but books here’. Poor guys, they were really disappointed.” Bayer recalls.

When his name turned up on the hit-lists of the Triple A (Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance), Bayer packed his family off to Germany and went to ground for a time himself, on a farm in Quilmes belonging to the anarchist Domingo García. His host never bought newspapers nor did he have a TV or radio. Bayer apes García’s Spanish accent and repeats the words uttered by him, a bone every bit as hard to gnaw as Bayer himself: “No product of the bourgeoisie comes in here, right?” But if I was to survive I needed to stay informed. I used to go to the station, buy a paper, read it and then place it in the bin. García knew everything and at every turn used to ask me “Scared? Popping outside just to check?” Then he opened a bag, showed me a massive pistol and told me: “Nobody gets in here, right?” But what could Domingo have done with his big gun if a 25-man commando had raided! In the end, Bayer decided in February 1975 to leave, but he returned a year later because Isabel Perón had called elections and he reckoned “increased freedoms” were on the way. Four weeks after that, the dictatorship was imposed and by then he had no way out. “The German embassy took me out in June ‘76 as a refugee. On account of my being a well-known writer with a German surname. Brigadier Santuchone who was in charge in Ezeiza at the time told the German cultural attaché: “You know, we Argentine military admire the German people for its discipline and its history.” Before training a dirty look on me and telling me: “As for you, you are leaving thanks to a request received from a friendly nation, but remember what I am telling you. Never, ever, set foot on the soil of my fatherland again.” As the plane took off, Bayer was thinking: “The wretch is right. This is my last ever sight of Buenos Aires.” But the wretch turned out to be wrong and Osvaldo was back by 1983. Prior to that he had spent time in universities in Germany, Holland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway exposing the disappearances: he published a fourth volume of La Patagonia rebelde in Germany and wrote what was to be his first and only novel, Rainer y Minou.

Q. Would you have like to be an anarchist like Severino?

A. Yes, I’d have liked that, but I am not cut out for it. When I was on the staff of Clarin, the people at La Protesta (which was still coming out then) wrote to me. I wrote some unsigned articles and the comrades would show up to collect them Can you imagine what would have happened had our publisher found out?

Q. And what are you up to at the moment. Are you writing something?

A. Yes, I'm writing my memoirs but it is taking me a lot of time. I'm up to the dictatorship of the "constipated general", as I called Onganía. That term has fallen out of use. I'm giving my age away there. How language has changed! Do you know what the problem is? I have lived such a long time ... through fourteen military dictatorships. Imagine. I'm 82 years old ... and I feel it ... but Marlene (Dietrich) pays me a visit every night, gives me a kiss and I sleep peacefully.

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