

Latin American anarchist women



Pamphlet about the lives of some little-known Latin American anarchist women, by Edgar Rodriguez.

DORVALINA MARTINS RIBAS

She was born in Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul) on 12 August 1900. While still a student she became a follower of Francisco Ferrer and adept in secular education. She became an anarchist and set about teaching workers' children. After training at the Porto Alegre Complementary School, by 1919 she was in charge of the Modern School set up in 1915 by Polidoro Santos, Cecilio Vilar, Zenon de Almeida, Djalma Fetterman and other activists.

According to the newspaper *O Sindicalista* in 1924: "That school was in operation for some years, delivering an education which, if not entirely rationalist, was a lot more rational than that delivered by today's schools which are awash with nonsensical and utterly irrational preconceptions. The school came to have four hundred pupils of both sexes."

The school operated out of 197, Rua Ramiro Barcelos in what was known then as the Colonia Africana, a sort of black ghetto located where the Bom Fim district stands today. The 3 May 1919 edition of *O Correio do Povo* reports that a workers' procession marking the 1st of May passed by the Modern School and was hailed by its pupils with a singing of the anthem 'Porvir' (Future). The workers - again according to the same source - responded with the anthem 'Filhos do Povo' (Sons of the People). The pupils were led by their teacher Dorvalina Ribas.

In 1921 Dorvalina married the Spanish activist Jesús Ribas and moved with him to Erechim. There they opened a small school, but the conservative climate in the area put paid to that plan and the couple returned to Porto Alegre after two years. Dorvalina carried on educating workers' children and Jesús Ribas found work as an electrician and was active with the Rio Grande do Sul Labour Federation (FORGS). Harried by employers, he switched to working at the clearance of stones from Santo Antonio hill. Dorvalina and Jesús both belonged to the International Anarchist Group in 1928 when she staged a well-attended exhibition for the FORGS by way of a tribute to Francisco Ferrer's memory. The exhibition took place in the Rua Jerónimo Coelho.

From the 1930s on Dorvalina and her husband remained committed to children's schooling, building the Institute for Children's Protection and Assistance right beside Santo Antonio hill. The idea had come to them after reports reached them of a Catholic group housing some children in a filthy barrack, feeding them on food scraps from bourgeois restaurants. Jesus and some friends raided the premises with a pistol at the ready and announced that the children were henceforth his responsibility. They founded the Institute to house the children, spending the couple's meagre savings and showing great commitment and with the support of the community.

Dorvalinda died of cancer in March 1944, aged 43.

source: www.anarkismo.net

ESPERTIRINA MARTINS

Born in Lajeado in Rio Grande do Sul, she was the youngest of the Martins sisters and was born in 1902. Together with her sisters Eulina, Dulcina and Virginia and brothers Nino, Henrique (who was to change his name to Cecilio Vilar) and Armando, her in-laws Djalma Fetterman and Zenon de Almeida, she was active in labour and anarchist circles. She was a pupil at Malvina Tavares's Modern School as was her future husband Artur Fabião Carneiro.

At just 15 years of age, in 1917 she primed the bomb that Djalma Fetterman used to counter a cavalry charge by the Army Brigade in the clash that erupted in the Varzea (where the Avenida João Pessoa is today) between anarchists and Brigade members in January that year. The clash had erupted in the course of the funeral of a worker murdered by the forces of repression. Espertirina carried the bomb, hidden in a bunch of flowers. Some months later, that July, a general strike erupted that would come to be known as 'The Folded Arms Strike' and which brought Porto Alegre and other cities in the state to a standstill: Espertirina and her family played an active part in this strike.

According to her cousin Marat Martins: "With her sister Eulina, Zenon de Almeida's wife, she moved away to Rio Grande where she took part in meetings, demonstrations and processions and indeed in a bloody clash with the forces of repression. She had completed her primary schooling and studied the violin, and could write and was an impassioned public speaker. On a portable press, Zenon and she ran off revolutionary pamphlets and newspapers, distributing these in the factories and working class districts. She returned to Porto Alegre as a grown woman and a convinced feminist. In 1925 she moved with Eulina and Zenon to Campos (Rio de Janeiro) and again linked up with anarchist groups and promoted meetings and gave talks.

With her sister Dulcina who had married Djalma Fetterman, she moved to Rio, to Ilha do Governador and Praia da Bandeira and there she married Fabião Carneiro who then moved on to São Paulo and a job at the Eclética advertising firm. In that city they both associated with Edgard Leuenroth, alongside whom they carried on with their revolutionary activities up until they returned to Porto Alegre. Espertirina died on 22 December 1942 following complications after a premature delivery, plus appendicitis. She died before she reached the age of 40, faithful to her revolutionary beliefs."

source: www.anarkismo.net

MALVINA TAVARES

Full name Julia Malvina Hailliot Tavares, she was born in Encruzilhada do Sol (in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil) on 24 November 1866. She pioneered secular education in Brazil. She studied in Porto Alegre and in 1890 married the Portuguese Jose Joaquim Tavares. After training started teaching in Encruzilhada in 1898, moving on after a year to Sao Gabriel da Estrela in the Lajeado district, known these days as Cruzeiro do Sul. She set up a school there and spent the remainder of her life there. She delivered a sort of secular and liberating, Modern School-style education to her pupils along the lines championed by the Spanish anarchist educator Francisco Ferrer. It was not long before her revolutionary educational methods paid off. Her pupils Nino Martins, Cecilio Vilar, Espertirina Martins and her sisters became active anarchist labour militants. That generation of militants shared great admiration for Malvina the teacher from whom they learnt their libertarian ideals. Malvina died on 16 October 1939. There is a street named after her in Porto Alegre.

source: www.anarkismo.net

ELENA QUINTEROS

She was born in Montevideo, Uruguay on 9 September 1945. She trained as a teacher at the Artigas Teacher Training School where she began her activism in the student union. In 1966, aged 21, she graduated as a teacher and found work at a school in Pando in Canelones. At that point she joined the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU) as well as the Student-worker Resistance (ROE), becoming active in the latter. Her activities were in the trade union field and she was part of the Socio-pedagogical Missions, an initiative launched by the lecturers from the Co-operative Rural Education Institute.

On 16 November 1967 she suffered her first arrest but was released the next day. In October 1969 she was arrested again, tried and sent to prison, remaining there until October 1970. In 1975 she was dismissed from her post by the dictatorship. On 26 June 1976 she was abducted from the gardens of the Venezuelan Embassy and taken to the quarters of 13th Infantry

Battalion before being moved from there under heavy escort on 28 June to prevent any contact with her organisation. Whilst under escort, she suddenly jumped over the Venezuelan Embassy's wall, calling out her name and asking for sanctuary: the embassy staff made to help her but her escort managed to stop them helping and thwart the escape. There followed a tug-of-war between the embassy staff and the military personnel who finally dragged Quinteros away to an armoured car. Her leg broken in the escape attempt, she was taken back to the 13th Infantry where the Uruguayan dictatorship had installed a torture centre. And that was the last news heard from Quinteros. The Venezuelan ambassador to Uruguay, Julio Ramos, telephoned the Uruguayan Foreign Affairs ministry and made a complaint to under-secretary Guido Michelin Salomón since the minister, Juan Carlos Blanco, was not at the ministry. This grew into a major diplomatic incident that culminated in Venezuela's cutting off diplomatic relations.

In October 2002, Judge Eduardo Cavalli found former minister Juan Carlos Blanco primarily responsible for the disappearance of Elena Quinteros and had him arraigned on charges of deprivation of liberty:

This is how Elena is remembered by her comrades in the FAU: "She said she was persistent. Persistent in her class outlook. She despised social climbing, reformism or electioneering ... She fought for a people's revolution, with the people in pride of place, for people's justice and not for any cobbled together solutions. She was never for authoritarian or exploitative solutions that have been extensively tried and generally been such disasters for the workers (...)" "Not to mention her impeccable moral outlook. Her sisterhood and selflessness were also part and parcel of this comrade who shall be part of us forever."

source: www.anarkismo.net

MARGARITA ORTEGA

Just as other revolutionary groups had - the supporters of Zapata and Villa and so on - Mexico's anarchist movement, headed by the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM) had taken up arms against General Porfirio Diaz's brutal dictatorship. As the struggle proceeded and despite the ghastly repression, the influence of the anarchist ideas of Magón and his comrades, grew more and more through the peasants and workers of northern Mexico and Baja California, just as the Zapatista rebellion was spreading across the south. At the beginning of 1911 one of the people in charge of liaison between the Magonista fighters was a woman, Margarita Ortega. Her danger-fraught mission was to cross enemy lines at the head of teams shipping weapons, food and medicines to armed groups hiding out in the mountains or lurking in the cities and towns. Her courage under fire and her skills - which enabled her to escape from several ambushes - became proverbial among the guerrillas.

The story of this extraordinary woman who lives on in popular song was well known and admired among revolutionaries. Although she come from a well to do family, she was preoccupied from very early on by the lot of the workers and, as she called them, the disinherited victims of social injustice. Not only did her family (keen to join the ranks of the wealthy bourgeoisie) reject their daughter's ideas, but they despised and rejected her position. Against this backdrop, Margarita married and soon gave birth to a daughter whom she named Rosaura and upon whom she showered great affection.

While Rosaura was an infant, her mother linked up with Flores Magón's anarchist movement. From the outset she was involved in extraordinary organisational activity that earned her the trust of underground groups. But as the bloody dictatorship drew to its end, the struggle took a harsher turn. In early 1911, a few months after the dictator stepped down, Margarita - we have this from Magón himself - suggested to her husband that they both join the guerrillas. 'I love you' - she told him - 'but I also love all who suffer and for whom I will fight and risk my life. I don't want to see any more men and women spending their strength, their health, their intelligence and their futures on enriching the bourgeois. I don't want to see men ordering other men around any more.' Her husband refused. So Margarita turned to her daughter, Rosaura Gortari: "And you, daughter? Are you ready to follow me or would you rather stay at home?" Rosaura did not hesitate before following her mother and they both joined the armed groups as fighters.

Come Porfirio Diaz's downfall on 21 May 1911, Mexico was hit by an explosion of joy. The people took to the streets in the belief that freedom and an end to misery were now within its grasp. Margarita and her daughter also returned to the city and shared their naive dream that an end to exploitation was at hand.

But the joy and the hope were short-lived. Once Madero was appointed president, he denied the people everything for which it had been fighting. Agrarian reform was ignored and communal lands were not returned. Over-long working days and poverty wage rates in the factories were left untouched. The miners were still enslaved by the interests of the foreign companies looting

the country ... Within a few months the prisons were filled again. Shootings and summary executions followed one upon the other across the country and many revolutionaries were forced to take to the hills again. Among them Zapata and Flores Magón.

At this point General Rodolfo Gallegos ordered Margarita and Rosaura taken out into the desert and marched under a blazing sun, with no water and no food as a warning that if they were to revert to the people's cause they would be executed.

For several days, mother and daughter trekked through the wasteland bordering the United States. Thirst and hunger sapped their resistance. The girlish Rosaura was first to collapse with exhaustion, her lips cracked and her face burned. Seeing her fall unconscious and with eyes closed, her mother thought that it was all over and contemplated suicide, but just as she pointed the revolver at her head she noticed that her daughter was watching her. From a strength drawn from who knows where, they made it as far as the city of Yuma in the USA.

Before they could recover fully from their ordeal, two US immigration service inspectors took the two women away, aiming to deport them to Mexico and certain death. Luckily, there was a sizable chapter of Flores Magón's anarchist movement in Yuma and it organised their escape. Margarita and her daughter - who had yet to get over the ordeal in the desert - were shipped by Magonist compatriots to Phoenix, Arizona, adopting the aliases of Maria Valdés and Josefina. Meanwhile, despite the nursing of her mother and her comrades, little Rosaura perished on arrival. For a time her mother's desperation seemed to deepen as she spent her days gazing towards the awful border that had claimed her daughter, but gradually the urge to carry on with the struggle she had embarked upon with her beloved daughter revived in Margarita. Somehow Rosaura would live on through her and their hope in a shared ideal would be maintained. So, together with comrade Natividad Cortés - as Flores Magon relates - she set about organising the revolutionary movement on northern Sonora, using Sonoyta in Sonora state as the base for her operations.

But tragedy stalked her in the form of General Rodolfo Gallegos who had now switched to supporting Carranza against the dictator Huerta who had murdered Madero and seized the presidency of Mexico.

In October 1913, Gallegos had been commissioned by Carranza to monitor the frontier and, in pursuance of this policing task, as cruel fate would have it, Gallegos seized the anarchists. Natividad Cortés was shot out of hand and Margarita was taken as a prisoner to Baja California where Gallegos ordered that she be dumped somewhere where the Huertistas could not fail to find and capture her, leaving her fate in their hands. Barely a month after that, on 20 November, Margarita was handed over to the dictator Huerta's troops. In a field near Mexicali she was tortured to get her to betray the comrades fighting the new dictatorship and supportive of the underground anarchist organisation. Margarita said nothing. For four days they forced her to remain standing up and when she collapsed they kicked and beat her with rifle butts until she was back on her feet. In view of her stubborn silence, on the morning of 24 November 1913, they brought her out into the desert and shot her, dumping her corpse. The following year the harrowing news reached Flores Magón and he penned a pained report recounting, step by step the awful, inspiring testimony of this indomitable woman, almost presaging his own fate.

Entries taken from selection given in Portuguese on www.anarkismo.net

ALZIRA WERKAUSER

Seamstress very active in Porto Alegre (state of Rio Grande do Sul), she took part in debates and spoke freely at meetings, representing the Garment-makers' Seamstresses and Allied Trades Union at the III Labour Congress in that state.

She was the first woman to take part in a southern Congress.

By way of a tribute to women and to mark their presence, steadfastness and ideological conviction, Orlando Martins put forward Alzira Wekauser's name as chair for the eighth session of the Congress. First, however, Alzira said a few things about women's failure to involve themselves in trade union struggles as well as their reluctance to speak out or contribute to the libertarian press. She stressed that most women held back, staying at home with the children so that their spouses might play a more active part in that struggle and dutifully bore the loss of job, imprisonment or "banishment" the men suffered for their beliefs and went on to speak on other matters put to Congress in the following motion:

"Comrades! As a woman and duty bound to speak to you of the conditions of proletarian women in general, I have to warn you that I do so in the certainty that there is a lot left to be desired. My data have been gathered, not just from learned books but from personal experience, so I may be wrong on specific points.

Not so my general point which I as a working woman have had the opportunity to observe for myself in my life as a female producer. Let me split this question into two elements: firstly, the economic and secondly, the social.

I have to caution you again that this will offer only a lame reflection of real life in that the working woman is doubly exploited, as a woman and as a working woman at that.

In economic terms, the average wage paid to women at present is 4\$ a day. Most of them have children to support and mothers and sisters, as well as themselves: given the cost of living, comrades, male and female, will appreciate the problems, the battles and the appalling diet with which working women generally have to contend.

Which is why you see us skinny and dejected, with no appetite for fighting for our very survival.

Especially when we consider that, whereas our working day is eight hours and more long, there are instances where it stands at 14 or 16 hours, as in the case, say, of the furriers, seamstresses on piece-rates, etc.. And we can imagine the state of mind of our sisters who, after tiresome work performed for a pathetic wage, must then tackle their household duties: as I say, most of them are mothers who need to support their loved ones and protect them from life's pressures. Small wonder at their frame of mind. We must take an interest in our female comrades who do not even have the time even to contemplate their wretched circumstances and organise themselves and join forces to better their lives. So I urge those male comrades who are organised to pay special attention to these downtrodden and exploited sisters and to try to give them a hand up, and encouragement and to bring them into the organisation, thereby doing their duty by them. We know that women are regarded as inferior, weaker beings, due to certain religious influences that ensure that they themselves think that they have no right to fight for their demands. In every industry we find female labour fiercely exploited as cheap labour by capitalists and entrepreneurs whereas no one but they themselves can and should fight for their own well-being. But there is a dire need for us to urge them on and give them encouragement in defending themselves against the exploiters' tyranny.

That task falls to the workers' organisations.

Which is why I put it to Congress that it pass a motion reminding every labour organisation of the need to make the organising of women part and parcel of its activities. Only thus can the dismal conditions of the great masses of female workers be improved.

As I say, my words can only offer a faded picture of real life but I hope that somebody with a more vigorous tongue will spell out women's conditions in this state and across the whole of Brazil and that this may serve as a spur to our sisters in misfortune so that they themselves can see and appreciate that only by organising themselves can they some day deploy the power of their unity to better their wretched conditions.

We should add that we cannot (nor should we) look to any political party or government for their economic, physical or moral protection, because History has nothing of the sort to show, or, if it does, it goes no further than crumbs scattered in order to calm restless minds at a point when wretchedness had become unbearable. So I move:

1. That the Labour Federation, as well as all of its affiliated unions and especially any union covering a trade in which there is a female presence in the workplace, should pay special attention to organising them.
2. That a particular effort should be made in our newspapers, bulletins, exhibitions and lectures to boost the spirits of the proletarian woman."

Edgar Rodrigues Os Companheiros, Vol 1 (Rio de Janeiro 1994)

AURORA NOVOA LOZANO

Brazilian seamstress from Santos, she was active in the anarcho-syndicalist movement, including during the strike calling for the 8-hour day that was launched in Santos docks in 1920-21, a strike in which she, with her sister Luzia and Maria Rodrigues played an outstanding part.

Exploiting her female condition, which in those days enjoyed a measure of respect from the police, she used her home and workshop as a meeting place for the strikers who would leave messages there for distribution in manifestoes addressed to the working class of Santos and to the populace at large. Lots of people afforded the strikers their protection, support and solidarity, including restaurant owners (who were nearly all Spanish) who fed the strikers free of charge.

In this great strike which saw the Navy deployed in the port of Santos, Aurora Novoa Lozano became a go-between for the strikers. They dropped off notes, messages, manifestoes and even “bombs” with her. But her activity was not confined to helping strikers and involvement in the class struggle.

She was also a member of the Social Drama Group launched by the Arts and Crafts Union based at 1, Avenida Ana Costa at the intersection with the Avenida Rangel Pestana: she stood out as an amateur actress of the first order.

Edgar Rodrigues, Os Companheiros, Vol. 1 (Rio de Janeiro, 1994)

CATALICE SILVA GRECO

Brazilian libertarian seamstress. Her working life started at an early age in Rio Grande do Sul. She was born there and that was where she served her apprenticeship before joining the labour movement and faced humiliation at police hands for her beliefs. A member of the Garmentmakers', Seamstresses and Allied Trades Union, she used to speak at meetings and, with Alzira Wekauer and Mauricio Felmann [Feldman?] - she represented her trade at the II Labour Congress in Porto Alegre on 27 September -02 October .

She married the anarchist Francisco Greco and valiantly championed anarchism at his side in workplaces, at meetings and congresses and on the streets, at home and in police stations in which she was mistreated and injured.

According to a statement made by her son Silvio Greco to Rafael Fernández, back in 1926-27, his parents were living in a cottage at 60 Rua Eldorado. For some time there had been a Modern School operating on the premises as well as a library and a crude press producing anarchist publications. There was a meeting room used for exhibitions and meetings. The police uncovered the “hide-out”, mustered their men and raided the premises. Captain Abelardo de Freitas from the Army Brigade was chosen by police chief Dario Crespo to take charge of the raid.

Nothing escaped the savagery of the troops: they piled up the books, newspapers, furniture and printing press and everything else they could find, doused them in kerosene and set them all alight.

A distraught Catalice Silva Greco responded by trying to salvage some of the books from the flames whereupon she was stopped by Captain Abelardo Freitas with punches, slaps and kicks.

When her partner Francisco Greco arrived home, the raiders grabbed him, beat him and made him ‘run the gauntlet’.

Despite all of the violence she endured and witnessed, Catalice never abdicated her beliefs and died an anarchist.

Edgar Rodrigues, Os Companheiros, Vol 1 (Rio de Janeiro 1994)

EMMA BALLERINI

Working woman and libertarian. Her involvement in the social question took place in Sao Paulo in the first three decades of the 20th century.

Emma Ballerini's name crops up in the anarchist press in relation to cultural ventures in Study Centres, as do reports of her arrest for her part in strikes.

But it was in protest campaigns that this libertarian feminist distinguished herself:

The partner of Gigi Damiani who was expelled from Brazil on 22 October 1919 without trial or arraignment just because he had been born in Italy, Emma Ballerini challenged police chief Dr Virgilio do Nascimento, the bane of São Paulo's working class in the pages of A Plebe as a scoundrel and forger, counterfeiting the reports used to separate decent working men from their families, blacken their names and banish them from Brazilian soil.

The document part of which we reprint below and which comes from Emma offers a fine portrait of the beliefs and fortitude of this libertarian woman activist:

“It certainly never occurred to Gigi Damiani that the São Paulo police, having expelled him unlawfully, would justify itself with criminal statements such as those contained in the note passed to a number of newspapers within and without this state.

It emerges from that note that Damiani was a thief and convicted as such by the Italian courts!

Damiani's criminal record derives from his having been formerly subject to an enforced residence order.

Damiani is allegedly an exploiter and false apostle of Anarchy in that he owns 60 thousand francs which were changed into Italian currency prior to his imprisonment.

Let us now look and see how much truth there is in that note and the extent of police libel and falsehood it contains since we are supposed to believe the police on the basis that they should not lie, especially not in such a nonsensical and laughable fashion.

As to the allegation of theft, my answer is that it is utterly false, no Italian court and no court archive holding anything to say that Damiani was ever tried for theft or for any other ordinary crime.

As to his being held under a residence order, my answer is that, under the Crispi-an reaction, he, like many another young socialist and republican was placed under an order of domicilio coatto for anarchist propaganda, a sentence he served on the island of Tremiti, which island never hosted as many old and young people who proudly stand for the noblest aspirations of the Italian proletariat (...)

As to the 60 thousand franc bombshell, let me ask Dr Virgilio do Nascimento or whoever might want to answer for him if that sum was sent by Damiani to Italy, or if it was found on the person of the deported man, or is still here or elsewhere in Brazil, sitting in some bank account.

And to make his task the easier let me state that in São Paulo's French and Italian Bank there is a 22 thousand franc deposit in the name of Emma Ballerini (Damiani's partner), an account saddled with a 3,500,000 debt to the same bank so that anyone interested can go and check for themselves, and note that that account was opened four years ago.

That is the truth and I defy the police to make a liar of me."

Edgar Rodrigues, *Os Companheiros*, Vol 2, Rio de Janeiro 1995, pp. 60-61

Translated by: Paul Sharkey.

Taken from <http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/2jm6zp>