

The Artists' Exchange

By Sandro Francisco Piedrahita

Your painting is the
beloved homeland,
Mexico is with you a prisoner.

To Siqueiros on Parting
Pablo Neruda

I write to you, my dearest Pablo, because only you will understand. Only you will recognize that art and revolution are coextensive, that the elimination of Leon Trotsky was absolutely required for an artist such as me. I do ask that you burn this letter as soon as you receive it, for its contents would be devastating in my prosecution or that of all the other patriots who participated in the armed actions against Trotsky. I know you comprehend that the only true artist is the committed artist, that his art must be at the service of the grand Communist cause. I make this confession to you, Pablo, in the expectation that you will accept it as the proud apologia of a fellow artist – and a fellow Stalinist.

It is obvious that you have made a great leap forward in your own work. You no longer write only about adolescent passions and doomed sexual desires. You now write poems about the greatness of Stalin and the endless struggle of the proletariat. While your poetry was always beautiful, now it is deeply meaningful and political. Your poetry of defiance has a weight it did not use to have. It is a plaintive cry of grievance, the people's melodious Communist complaint. In a way, your poems are no different from my murals, and I say this without a trace of pride or vanity, for I recognize you are the better artist. But like the great muralists, you have made your work accessible to the masses and have abandoned bourgeois conventions in favor of a revolutionary art. Your book of poems, *Spain in the Heart*, makes manifest your allegiance to the cause of Stalin and explains why your writing took a political turn. You ask, "And where are the lilacs? And the metaphysics laced with poppies?" And you respond, "Come and see the blood in the streets!"

I fought in the Mexican Civil War, but I was just a teenager and did not fully understand all its implications. Only with the passage of the years did I become a committed Communist. Like you – correct me if I'm wrong – I truly became a Stalinist in the crucible of the Spanish Civil War. Before I fought in Spain, I did not know the difference between a staunch Stalinist and a traitorous Trotskyite, but I soon learned. Oh, how soon I learned! Trotsky was more dangerous than Franco's Nationalists, for he was undermining the cause of the Spanish Republic from within. He pretended that he was the representative of a genuine Communism when in fact he was in league with the reactionaries and the fascists, even receiving financial aid from the oppressive Yankees. And worst of all: Trotsky was doing so from his headquarters in my own country!

I racked my brains trying to figure out why President Lazaro Cardenas – an authentic progressive who had boldly nationalized my country's oil industry – was so accommodating to the counter-revolutionary Trotsky and gave him a place from which he could spew his venom. I tried and tried to remedy the situation through peaceful means – even had a long chat with President Cardenas at Los Pinos – but it all came to naught. I realized that we had to bring the war to Trotsky, that we had to attack his base at Coyoacan. I first thought about doing so when the Trotskyite

P.O.U.M.¹ undermined the Communist cause at Catalonia. The decision became irrevocable by the time I returned to Mexico and realized the extent of Trotsky's activities on behalf of the reactionaries in Mexico and worldwide.

I realized the triumph of Franco had been Trotsky's handiwork and I didn't want him to achieve a similar purpose in my own country. After all, he was surrounded by Americans at all times, his bodyguards were gringos, and even his typist was a Yankee. He received money from rich Americans routinely and managed to sell his manuscripts to Harvard University for a hefty sum. He even offered to speak to the Un-American Activities Committee of the United States House of Representatives to aid the Yankees in their attacks on international Communism. And yet he had the gall to claim he was a Communist himself!

The betrayal by the Trotskyites in Barcelona was a pivotal moment in the history of the war and would prove to be a Rubicon of sorts for me. I happened to have been in Catalonia at the time and witnessed Trotskyite treachery firsthand. Trotsky's men, under the flag of the P.O.U.M., openly defied the Communists and began a war within a war. Rather than using their bullets to attack the fascist usurpers, the Trotskyites used their weapons to fight and kill the very patriots who were opposing Franco. It was sheer pandemonium as the Trotskyites and the Stalinists faced off against each other on the streets of the Catalan capital, leaving behind them a trail of corpses. Were it not for the internecine battle in Barcelona, the course of the war would have been different. Trotsky destroyed the Republic while it was still in its crib through his actions and directives, acting as a grand puppet master who could direct the outcome of the war in Spain while comfortably sitting at his desk in a spacious house in Coyoacan. For that, he had to be brought to justice. I was only too glad to have become his sworn executioner, for my intention had always been to kill him.

Let me thank you again for your kind offer of refuge in your native country. I am already working on a grand mural at Chillan called "Death to the Invader." I hadn't painted a mural in years and now your nation is giving me the opportunity to do so. The mural depicts the oppression of the native man in both our nations, Mexico and Chile, as well as their shared defiance over the centuries. The south wall represents the indigenous people of Chile resisting the Spanish conquistador while the north wall represents Mexico's native peoples doing the same. The central wall represents the Mapuche warrior, Galvarino, symbolizing Chilean resistance to the European satraps. Next to him is Bernardo O'Higgins symbolizing Chile's war of independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century. Lautaro the Araucanian Indian warrior and other Chilean heroes are also portrayed. Heroes from Mexico are similarly depicted, beginning with Cuauhtemoc, six meters high and stepping on the cadaver of a Spanish conquistador with an Aztec lance through the Spaniard's chest. There are also portrayals of the Mexican heroes, Benito Juarez, Jose Maria Morelos, Miguel Hidalgo, Emiliano Zapata, Lazaro Cardenas and others. In a word, the mural seeks to encapsulate the entirety of the troubled history of our similarly wondrous but punished countries.

Until I painted the mural, I had not realized the extent to which our two nations share a parallel history of ongoing oppression and resistance, with native peoples defending their culture and their liberty to the death and multiple revolutionaries and warriors of independence seeking simple justice. It should not have surprised me for the story of all Latin America is the same, a never-ending cycle of subjugation and liberation. I look forward to seeing you explore this issue in your writing, Pablo. Don't trust those who tell you your poetry will be ruined if you use it to convey a Communist message. On the contrary, one ode to Stalin is worth a hundred poems of

¹ Spanish acronym for Workers' Party of Marxist Unification

love to an ordinary woman. Push your work, Pablo Neruda! Push it in a revolutionary direction!
Make your poetry a weapon in the hands of the proletariat!

Best wishes to you and to Delia from your comrade Siqueiros.

I received your news from Chile with enthusiasm and curiosity. I profusely thank you for remembering me, David. You can rest assured that the letter has been destroyed, and I shall keep your secrets in confidence forever. There are certain gaps in your writing, certain ambiguities, but I shall not trouble you with questions at this time. You can tell me all you want in due course. I, too, became a committed Stalinist after the horror of Barcelona, although it happened after I had ceased being the Chilean consul for that city. Unlike you, I did not witness the atrocities firsthand, but I read about them with a combination of consternation and despair.

As far as writing for the revolution, I started doing so long ago, when I was still the Chilean consul in Barcelona and wrote *Spain in My Heart*. The book was printed by Republican troops on improvised presses before being sent to the soldiers at the front. Indeed, the publication of that book of poems was part of the reason I lost my post as consul for Madrid and was barred from Spain forever. I have come to believe that a work of art, be it a poem or a mural, is inseparable from its historical and political context. As a result of my experiences during the Spanish Civil War, I have finally entered the political stage of my writing, never to return to my twenty-year-old's exclusive fascination with romantic subjects. So I suppose that the purpose of my work is now more aligned than ever with that of the Mexican muralists, including you, the best among them. I must write for the miners of Antofagasta, the quechua peasants of Cusco, the martyred dead revolutionary poets of Spain. Oh, how I miss them! My brother Garcia Lorca who was to teach me how to write even in death, the gentle shepherd Miguel Hernandez whom I loved like a son! They were the face of Spain. They died because they were Communist poets, in other words, the people's poets, and my rage could not be greater. The abysmal death of Garcia Lorca, in particular, forever changed my art.

I have started a book of poetry tentatively titled *Canto General*. I started writing it two years ago, shortly after I left Spain. It is meant to be an encyclopedic text, a series of long poems about Latin America's troubled history as well as its stubborn resilience and dignity. I mean to tell the story not of a single country, but of all Bolivar's crucified continent, for I still share the Liberator's dream of a united Latin America. You can be assured that my incipient work about the Latin America's tumultuous past is being written through a revolutionary lens. That is the only way to understand our history, by seeing it through the prism of Marxist-Leninism. Although I shall celebrate the beauty of Hispanic America, I shall not shirk from my duties to represent the continent's ugly story of relentless infamy and oppression, beginning when the hooves of the Spaniards' horses first touched the natives' soil and continuing to the present, when so many of our countries are ruled by caudillos in alliance with the Yankees. I intend to write about all the protagonists of Latin America's tortured and contradictory past, its Inca warriors and its Aztec priests, its Mayan poets and its colonial artists, its liberators and its dictators, its revolutionaries and its generals, its heroes and its monsters. I imagine a work of immense scope, not unlike the works you muralists are doing in Mexico. I say this because my images and poetry – the content as well as the structure – could be taken from a monograph on Mexican muralism. Indeed, some of the poems I have already written in Mexico sing about the same heroes celebrated in your mural at Chillan: Cuauhtemoc, Juarez. Zapata, Morelos and Cardenas.

So I would like to ask you a favor, David. I would be eternally grateful if you were to illustrate my poems. If you do not have the time, just let me know. But given that our views on art and revolution coincide, I can think of no better person to provide the drawings for my projected oeuvre.

I should tell you that I know more about the multiple attempts to eliminate Trotsky than you might think. You must recall that during the initial effort to assassinate him, Iosif Grigulevich, also known as Felipe, was among your cadres, the Russian mastermind behind it all. I had been in contact with him long before the first attack on Trotsky's Coyoacan estate and knew about some of his clandestine activities in Mexico. After the initial failed attack on Trotsky, I personally saved the Russian and two collaborators, Antonio Pujol Jimenez and Laura Araujo Aguilar, from the Mexican police. As you know, Antonio Pujol Jimenez was a muralist just like you who also fought in Spain for the Republicans and participated on the armed strike on Trotsky's base at Coyoacan. For me, rescuing you, Felipe, Araujo and Pujol from the wrath of the Mexican authorities was my first revolutionary act. I did not wield a weapon, but the elimination of Trotsky wouldn't have been possible without my intervention. So, then, I must confess to you some counter-revolutionary scruples. Was I complicit in a murder? That thought bothers me day and night, my comrade. After all, had I not saved Felipe from prison after the first attack, the second attack probably would have never happened.

I remember Grigulevich well— his small, hunched figure, his shock of white hair, his apparatchik's cool demeanor – and I ask myself whether he was plotting the assassination of Trotsky all along. He first appeared at my consular offices in Mexico City to introduce himself as Felipe and to thank me for my participation in helping hundreds of Spanish Communists find refuge in Mexico. I reassured him that I was a staunch supporter of Stalin and that I believed the Soviet Union's example should be emulated everywhere, in Mexico and Chile, and everywhere else. The Revolution in Mexico had been incomplete and in Chile reactionary forces still had too much control.

Then he asked me point blank, "Would you be willing to advance Stalin's cause in Mexico? You're in a position of power and could pull some strings."

"What do you have in mind?"

He hesitated, seemed unsure of what to say.

"It's a delicate matter," he finally admitted. "I do not mean to startle you. I have certain orders from Stalin himself."

"I have been working on several odes to Stalin, though they remain unpublished. Whatever his intentions are, I shall support them."

"Good, that is good," he said. "You must understand that Stalin has his share of enemies, and not all of them live in Spain or the Soviet Union."

"You're beating around the bush," I said impatiently. "What enemy are you thinking about? And how could I assist you?"

By then, I knew of the fierce passions which had been inspired by the presence of Trotsky in Mexico City. For some reason, that was the first name which came to mind as I listened to Felipe. I remembered the death sentence issued by Stalin against Trotsky.

"The enemy," replied Felipe, "is one who is powerful enough to thwart Stalin's efforts throughout the world."

Then he paused and looked out the window, letting his words sink in my mind.

"Are you thinking of Trotsky?" I inquired.

“Let’s say *arguendo* that I am.”

“And what do you intend to do, *arguendo* as you say?”

“At some point there may be a raid on his estate. Its only purpose will be to retrieve some documents to prove his perfidy. We don’t anticipate that there will be any deaths.”

“How on earth could I help you with that?”

“You’re a man of great power, a poet of international renown, perhaps the only Communist with such a bullhorn. After the assault, you could rally your friends in the artistic and political communities so that the punishment will be mitigated. You could protect me, saying I have diplomatic immunity. You could defend all the rest on the argument that their purpose was not to kill the traitor.”

“I don’t think that if you raid his house, you will fail to kill Trotsky.”

“Let’s say *arguendo* that we do. There would still be a myriad of ways you could help us, *ex post facto* as it were.”

“I am pledged to the cause of Stalin,” I responded, making it clear that I would not disclose the plot or do anything to impede it.

When the initial raid on the Coyoacan estate happened, I decided to do all I could to help your group. You may not be aware of all the details as you were still in hiding at the time, but my loyalty to the Stalinist cause even led to threats of assassination against me. My consulate was repeatedly pelted by rocks and eggs. I was accused of covering up the murder of Robert Sheldon Harte, the lone victim of your raid, but I weakly argued that he had been a Soviet spy and that there was no proof as to who had killed him or why. You should also know – and I consider it a point of honor to have done it – that I paid a sizeable sum of money to the Mexican tribunal handling your case. Without that little *mordida*², the court would never have found that despite three-hundred shots of machine gun fire, it was never your intention to kill the doomed Russian traitor.

At all events, this letter is already too long, my friend, and I encourage you to burn it too. I have a final question for you, comrade to comrade. Did you participate in armed action against Trotsky merely for political reasons or was there hatred in your heart? After all, at the time of the attacks on Trotsky, the Spanish Civil War had already been won by Franco. By then, Trotsky was a paper tiger, an old man without an army tending to his bunnies.

Oh, and one last thing before I forget. Could you send me a copy of your essay on how to paint a mural? I think it might help me while I’m writing my *Canto General*.

First of all, Pablo, I would be delighted to provide illustrations for your book of poems. I have always believed that art should be at the service of the revolution, and your project seems to be in accord with that. No sense in writing poetry that is so abstruse that it can only be understood by a mere sliver of people, those who call themselves the intelligentsia. I admire Cesar Vallejo and trust his bona fides as a Communist, but much of his poetry is inscrutable to most people, with the obvious exception of *Spain, Take this Cup from Me*. I hope and trust that *Canto General* will be

² A *mordida* is a bribe in Mexican slang.

written for the masses and will be instructive to them all. In a word, I expect the publication of the poems will be a revolutionary act.

You ask whether my hatred of Trotsky was personal or political and I must confess that it was both. Certainly, I could not help but hate a man who was relentlessly attacking Stalin at a time when the Soviet Union was the country doing the most to help the cause of Spain. But you are right. Much of my hatred was deeply personal, as he forced me to engage in an action which I regret to this day. Or perhaps I should not say regret, as I would do it again under the same circumstances. Perhaps I should say he led me to an act which has caused in me an abiding melancholia. The memory of those seven blindfolded Catalan youths facing the firing squad with bravery has left me with an image I will not soon forget. And yes, I blame that rabid counter-revolutionary Trotsky for what happened.

When I arrived in Spain, I immediately enlisted in the ranks of the Republican army and was made a major, commanding a platoon of more than a thousand men. Many of them were anarchists and Trotskyites, although I'm not quite sure they understood their differences with the Stalinists very well. At all events, the day came when we had to face off against the Trotskyite P.O.U.M. in the streets of Barcelona. A group of about twelve men in my platoon openly defied my orders to take armed action against the P.O.U.M. Truth be told, it was not altogether a surprise. My anarchist soldiers were notorious for their lack of discipline and their belief that in an anarchist society there should be no difference between a general and a private. But this time my men were disobeying an order when disobedience could result in the Stalinists' defeat in battle. So I gave them a final order. Put on your uniforms, pick up your arms and get ready for battle. Otherwise – mark my words – you will be executed.

To my astonishment, seven of the Trotskyites refused to comply even if it meant their certain death. I had been sure that all of them would return to battle rather than face the threatened execution. But it was not so. One of the men – I still remember his name was Pujols – told me that he had enlisted to fight Franco's *falangistas* but not his fellow Communists. He drew no distinction between Stalinist or Trotskyite, anarchist or socialist. He knew who the enemy was, and it was not the bedraggled anarchist and Trotskyite rebels of Barcelona. So he said, "You can kill me, but you can't force me to kill my comrades. I would rather die than use my carbine to murder my fellow anarchists and Trotskyites."

I had never ordered the execution of one of my own men, not in Mexico, not in Spain, not in any other place. But this situation was unique. If I just let it go, there was a chance that more of my men would defect. Who knows how many of my soldiers would refuse to engage in battle if they weren't given an example of what their punishment would be if they resisted? At the same time, I was moved by the valor of those seven men. Surely, they were the best Spain had to offer. And yet they had to be punished.

Pujols asked not to be blindfolded and soon several of the other men followed suit. Suddenly, when facing the firing squad, one of the men – he must have been no older than seventeen – collapsed onto the ground and began to wail. I was wondering whether he would desist from his decision not to fight and if so, what my reaction would be. Surely it was no longer the time for mercy, but to this day I believe that if he had asked for it, I certainly would have spared him. After all, he was just a boy, and he knew nothing about the various strands of Communist thought.

But soon Pujols attended to the youth lying on the ground and helped him to his feet.

"*Animo,*" said Pujols. "We will all die together. Die as a man, as a martyr to your comrades."

And then I gave the order to my men. I joined them in the firing squad as I felt that if I was giving them such a command, the least I could do is participate in its execution. I aimed my fire at the head of the seventeen-year-old, not because I felt any particular ire toward him, but because I wanted his death to be as painless as possible.

I should let you know, David, that there was an assassination attempt against me a month ago while I was on vacation in the *balneario* of Cuernavaca with my wife, her parents, a group of Chilean diplomats and several friends. We were sitting at a table of the Amatlan Restaurant when I was suddenly attacked. There was no plot to kill me as far as I know, but I have no doubt that was the assailants' intention as they crushed my head with their *lacazos*, beer bottles and chairs, anything they could find in order to kill me. They even used *boleadoras*, an Argentine weapon consisting of three metal balls attached to the ends of a cord. It was obvious that they knew I was Pablo Neruda, their sworn nemesis and worst enemy, for they addressed me by my name amid their insults. Although we forcefully resisted, it was impossible to oppose so many men. And then they struck my head with an iron rod. My guayabera shirt was steeped in red. The gash in my head was more than ten centimeters long, about as large as the wound suffered by Trotsky in the final attack. I was forced to spend several days at the hospital with my head entirely wrapped in bandages. I was told to move as little as possible in order to lessen the likelihood of a stroke. I lost a lot of blood but not my consciousness.

The eight or ten attackers – men with the necks of bulls and heads of steel – were German Nazis who had heard our toast to Stalin and the Soviet Union and were offended by it. Never mind that at the time Stalin was already an ally of Roosevelt and Churchill in their joint effort to repel Hitler's armies. I know the men at the Amatlan restaurant were Nazis because as they attacked us they erupted in Nazi cheers. They only stopped their cheers after I collapsed bloodied on the ground and they presumed me to be dead, prompting their escape. At all events, once the assailants were caught it was clear that they were all Germans or Mexicans of German descent. Looking back, I wonder whether the assault was planned. There is no way to know – the attackers would confess nothing – but I have my suspicions. After all, wasn't it a strange coincidence that the Nazis were sitting right next to us in the restaurant at Cuernavaca? Or perhaps they happened to be there because the owner of the restaurant was a German named Kabler, who was known for his Nazi sympathies and also joined in the attack. Even after my massive head injury, I kicked Kabler after he approached me to ask me to forget about the incident. How could I possibly forget that my head had exploded in blood like a monstrous piñata? At all events, their attack failed that time, but how can I be sure that it won't happen again? After all, Mexico is full of *gachupines*, reactionary Spaniards who have been in the country for years and are the sworn champions of Franco and the Catholic Church. They know that I am a Communist and a nonbeliever.

You should also know that the American Central Intelligence Agency has made the scurrilous accusation through its organs – Mexico's right-wing political parties, politicians and presses – that I was a participant in the assault of Trotsky's home in Coyoacan during the first assassination attempt. This is a bold-faced lie, intended to incite my assassination and silence a powerful Communist who happens to have an international platform. I have been receiving messages, David, all sorts of messages. I do not know whether they come from friend or foe. Better be on the lookout, comrade, one message said. Don't leave the consulate for any reason, counseled a second. Another warned that all the Communists in Mexico, including veterans of the Spanish Civil War, should be prepared for execution or exile. A fourth envelope only contained a single

gold-plated bullet. The message was nevertheless clear: they want me to leave Mexico and return to Chile under pain of death.

These are difficult times to be a Communist in Mexico but even more difficult times to stand on the sidelines. Hitler's attempt to conquer the Soviet Union requires that every man of good faith rally under Stalin's banner – not just the Communists but everyone who wants to resist the onslaught of the homicidal Germans and their allies throughout the world. Yes, I am more of a Stalinist than ever! I shall write my hymns for his greater glory! I have read the accusations against Stalin and don't believe them. If he has blood on his hands, let it be. It is not the blood of the innocents that paints his hands red. It is the blood of those who had to be killed, a million men like Trotsky, who had to be sacrificed in the furnace of the revolution. To those who claim I was involved in the assassination of the traitor with the goatee, I say that I wasn't there but that I should have been.

Your courage on that evening in May of 1940, my dearest David, was more revolutionary than a thousand poems or a hundred murals.

There is something I haven't told you, Pablo, and I think it is something that you should know. At all relevant times I was an agent of the GPU, paid by the Soviet government in order to achieve their goals in Mexico. I feel no shame about it, for I was not doing it for the money. I was doing it to support the glorious cause of the great Stalin and the Soviet Union. At all events, it is better to receive money from Moscow than to take it from American capitalists, as Diego Rivera is wont to do. The GPU first recruited me while I was in Spain, soon before I was ousted from the country along with all other members of the international brigades. My first task was to deliver a pouch of documents to certain members of Mexico's Communist party. I performed my duties well but did not hear from the GPU for another three months. I sent them repeated messages informing them of my desire to do more for Stalin's cause. When I finally heard from them, they informed me of a monumental mission. They wanted me to kill Leon Trotsky and to provide me with the means to do so. They warned me that if I disclosed the plans to anyone, it would mean my certain death, as well as that of Angelica and my daughter Adriana. I had no objection to their request, however, as I had been thinking about the assassination of Trotsky for years. So, we began to develop our plans in a small room behind a travel agency which was a front for GPU activities. The mastermind, as you well know, was Iosif Grigulevich, also known as Felipe.

At first, the meetings were just between me and Felipe, although at times another Soviet GPU agent, Pavel Sudoplatov, sat in on our conversations in complete silence. Felipe had photographs of Trotsky's Coyoacan estate from different angles, as well as pictures of Trotsky's private bodyguards. He had also somehow obtained the architectural plans for the whole mansion and knew where Trotsky's bedroom was located as well as his study and his library. I had the sense at the beginning that he was trying to decide whether I was the right man for the job. I had convinced him early on of my Stalinist bona fides, but he wanted to make sure I was mentally equipped for such a difficult and complicated mission. Eventually Felipe allowed me to bring several other men to our meetings, mostly Mexican muralists who were committed Communists, certain miners with whom I'd worked before, and former soldiers from the Spanish Civil War. Together, we outlined the plans for the assassination of Trotsky. Felipe warned that any defectors would be relentlessly persecuted by Stalin's intelligence services.

What many people don't understand, Pablo, is that I only acted after a legitimate court had tried Trotsky in absentia and found him guilty. Conclusive evidence of treason had been presented against him and all the strictures of due process had been carefully observed. A competent Soviet tribunal had issued a death sentence against him so all my actions were justified. What people fail to see is that I acted as a representative of Stalin's government, not as a demented criminal. That is why I wore a uniform when we attacked Trotsky's house and sought to bring the traitor to justice. The man was running the headquarters of the international counter-revolution from his own home, guilty of espionage, sabotage, and treason. He had used the Trotskyites in Spain to help support Franco's cause and was directly responsible for the cataclysm which followed. Don't the Americans routinely hang men for lesser crimes? I was trying to accomplish nothing different.

When we approached the home of the traitor, we found it was protected by about five Mexican policemen as well as half a dozen American Trotskyites. This was not surprising given that Trotsky was working at the bidding of the American empire. None of the Mexican policemen or the gringo interlopers put up any resistance to our rifles and machine guns and we easily tied them up. One of Trotsky's American bodyguards, Robert Sheldon Harte, had secretly been working with the Soviet GPU and he quickly ushered us into the mansion. We entered the home and began spraying all the rooms with machine gun fire, including the room where Trotsky and his wife Natalia slept. More than a hundred bullets must have riddled the door to their bedroom. but miraculously they managed to survive. At some point we found Trotsky's fifteen-year-old grandson Esteban restlessly wandering through the halls. I gave the order not to kill him, although it would have been justified as an act of revolutionary justice. Stalin himself had ordered the execution of Trotsky's son Leon Sedoff, and it was rumored that Trotsky's other three children had also been assassinated. But I could not bring myself to execute his grandson. Chalk it up to bourgeois scruples, Pablo. I should have realized that the elimination of Esteban would have sent the world a powerful message. After all, Trotsky's children had all ended up supporting the Fourth International, Trotsky's vehicle in his betrayal of the masses. Esteban could be expected to do no less so I should have given the order to kill him

You must have read that I claimed that our only purpose was to find documents proving Trotsky's traitorous perfidy, but I must disabuse you of any such notion, *entre nous* as they say in French. Our one and only purpose was to execute him. Let me repeat that. *Our one and only purpose was to execute him.* We only left after we were convinced he had been killed by the barrage of machine gun fire. Perhaps my public statement that we only meant to frighten Trotsky and steal some documents was an act of cowardice. However, I more than made up for it through my subsequent activities. At all events, I had no intention of rotting in prison and must reiterate my thanks to you, Pablo, for giving me safe haven in Chile so that I could avoid incarceration in Mexico.

I can now better understand what happened, David, although there are certain lacunae in your writing. You seem to suggest that you were involved in the second assassination attempt too, the one that claimed Trotsky's life, but you never admit it outright. I had been wondering about this issue ever since your first missive to me but felt that you would tell me at the right time. I think that time has come, my good friend David, now that there is complete trust between us. Did you have anything to do with Ramon Mercader's murder of Trotsky with an ice pick?

For my part, I should announce to you that my only daughter, Malva, has died at the age of eight. I have been separated from her mother Marika Hagenaar for years, even since I left them in Spain after I became consul to Mexico. Truth be told, I was not an exemplary husband or father,

but then again, most fathers aren't cursed with a child with a bloated hydrocephalic head. "She is a perfectly ridiculous being," I complained to the poet Garcia Lorca, "a three-kilogram vampire." He responded by writing a poem in her honor. Vicente Aleixandre also wrote about her, the girl with "an enormous head, an implacable head who would have devoured all its features to be only that: a ferocious head, growing without pity or interruption..." I never wrote a poem about her, for I was too busy writing for the international proletariat to care about a single girl – a child I initially cherished with all my heart until I discovered she was slowly becoming a monster. After I left them, I never sent them a penny, even though Marika would send me a letter every month asking for a hundred dollars. "Dear pig," she'd write in English, "you must help me support your daughter." But I never responded to her letters.

Callous, right?

Well, put yourself in my shoes, David. Imagine what you'd do if your wife Angelica had done such a thing to you.

I must also tell you that being Pablo Neruda in Mexico City is becoming more and more dangerous. My enemies know exactly where my weaknesses lie, perhaps they know me even better than I know myself, certainly better than my wife Delia. As you know, Delia is twenty years older than me and frankly I don't desire her anymore. A woman of forty might be attractive, but not a woman at sixty. So I have given myself to certain escapades, if you know what I mean. I had never thought of them as being risky in a political sense, had not even considered that one of my sometime lovers might turn out to be a reactionary spy. Certainly I didn't suspect anything from my secretary Mariana Iparraguirre, for she told me her parents were both Basque exiles and all Basques – or so I thought – detest Franco after what happened at Guernica.

Mariana is young and beautiful and desirable like the subject of one of my adolescent poems. I never thought of taking her to bed, not because she told me she was a married woman – you know I don't suffer from such scruples – but because I resist entering sexual relationships with women who work for me. Such couplings never work, for after the passion fades you have to continue seeing the woman at every turn and that makes for awkward circumstances, to say the least.

Nevertheless, it was Mariana who slowly seduced me. She was the mischievous cat and I her little mouse. She set up the mousetrap and I fell into it like a rodent blind and lustful. At first it was just offhand comments, double entendres, sexual innuendoes. She knew how to appeal to my vanity and as you well know, I'm a slave to my vanity. Once, after I dictated a letter to Diego Rivera, she made a direct reference to my sexual prowess: "For men like you and Diego, making the conquest of a woman must be fairly easy. Genius is an aphrodisiac, and it powerfully attracts women. I know Diego Rivera strays. I imagine that you do too, that you know how to delight a woman in bed."

I didn't quite know how to respond, especially given the way she was looking at me, with the eyes of a doe which could also have been confused with those of a jaguar.

I don't want to bore you with more detailed descriptions of her advances. Suffice it to say that the other times we were alone she was increasingly more direct. She was making it quite clear that if I wanted her, I could have her. And then it happened: I succumbed to her embrace in a moment of blind passion. It was around nine o'clock in the evening and everyone else had left the consulate. I had to dictate many letters to Mariana which could not wait, as I had been putting off my response for weeks. At the same time, being alone with her and in such proximity led me to what scrupulous Jesuits call thoughts of concupiscence. I remember Mariana was wearing a simple floral dress with the hem above her knees and what I later discovered was a plunging bra which

made her breasts seem fuller. At some point I was writing a letter to Ernest Hemingway – we had become friends of sorts in Spain – and I did not know how to say the word “*gachupines*” in English. Behind my desk there was a shelf where I kept a few important books, dictionaries for multiple languages, thesauruses, certain literary works which I treasured above the rest, Garcia Lorca’s *Cancionero Gitano* for example. As Mariana reached for the English dictionary, she let her body come very close to my face, so close that I could smell the perfume in her breasts, the scent of a wild garden verbena. I immediately sought solace in her arms, no longer avoiding the inevitable. She did not resist but threw herself on my large desk as if it were a bed. We ended up on the floor, wrapped in each others’ arms. And from that moment on, we became indefatigable lovers.

Little did I realize it at that time that Mariana was my sworn executioner, for Basque or not, she detested the Republicans for having murdered thousands of priests as well as her own brother Pancho. And even her last name had been an invention.

I shall answer your question about my participation in the second and fatal attack on Leon Trotsky, but I emphasize that you must immediately destroy this letter after reading it. Flush it down the toilet, swallow it if you must. Although innuendoes have been made, no one has been able to come forward with any evidence implicating me in the murder. If this letter were to fall into the wrong hands, it would be a catastrophe.

I first met Ramon Mercader while I was meeting with Iosif Grigulevich, the man known as Felipe, in a room in the travel agency used by the GPU. I gathered that Felipe had a back-up plan in case my men and I failed in our attempt to assassinate Trotsky. Mercader was to be sent into Trotsky’s Coyoacan estate after befriendng the old traitor and then would execute him as the opportunity presented itself. I must tell you that from the beginning I thought Mercader was not the right man for the job. How can I put it? I had a sense that he was mentally unstable. He constantly spoke about his mother Caridad – she was the one who had first contacted the GPU to offer his services – and he insisted that she attend our meetings. For some inscrutable reason he had multiple aliases even before being recruited by the Soviets to kill Trotsky. Sometimes he had said his name was Frank Jacson, at others Jacques Mornard, sometimes Salvador Torkof, Ramon Mercader to those whom he trusted. But even that last name was not to be believed, for Mercader was his mother’s maiden name and not his patronymic.

In retrospect, it might be that he had multiple aliases because he had been in the employ of the GPU for years, but somehow I doubt that he had participated in previous missions for Russian intelligence. Although he was a fanatic Stalinist, his apparent mental instability did not make for a very trustworthy spy. He had been a very slippery man throughout his life and I’m sure that before the assassination of Trotsky he had been involved in his share of demented actions. There were rumors of a Parisian murder, for example.

Mercader began to meet with Felipe and me about two months before the initial attempt on Trotsky’s Coyoacan estate. It was decided not to use him in that first attempt, but to keep him on reserve in case the initial action failed. The alternative plan was for Mercader to befriend Trotsky and assassinate him in his own home. I gathered from what I heard that Mercader had been plotting the murder for some time. Somehow he had seduced Sylvia Ageloff, a fervent Trotskyite who had free access to Leon’s home. Given the relationship, Mercader was thereafter able to enter Trotsky’s fortress easily. The old traitor had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to fortify his home, but never had the presence of mind to realize that his death might be caused by an inside man.

At first, Felipe – also known as the “French Jew” – did not want Mercader’s mother Caridad to participate in any of our sessions. That made a certain sense. After all, only Mercader and I participated in our discussions of Plan B with Felipe. Not even the team of miners and muralists I had assembled for the initial attack were able to join in any meetings where Mercader was present. But Felipe quickly realized that having Mercader’s mother in our discussions could harden her son’s resolve. After all, he was being asked to participate in a suicide mission. Even if he succeeded in killing Trotsky, his guards would quickly overpower him and Felipe had commanded him to take his own life if he was unable to escape.

The astonishing thing is that Caridad prodded her son on, telling him Stalin was the undisputed leader of worldwide Communism and his enemies had to be quashed. I understood that she was an even greater Stalinist than me and suspected she was a GPU operative long before her son. We decided to take two cars on the mission, one would be driven by Mercader and close behind him I would follow. Before he went on his suicidal mission– armed with an ice pick, a dagger and a pistol – his mother didn’t give him a blessing like an ordinary mother would. Instead, she gave him an image of Josef Stalin and told him it was worse to be a coward than to be dead for a great cause.

The plan was for the attack to take no more than fifteen minutes. I had parked my car about two blocks from Trotsky’s home and was heavily disguised. I had grown a long beard and had dyed my hair a reddish color. If everything went as planned, Mercader would not take his own car – it would be too easy for the police to find him if he did so – but he would walk the two blocks to reach my vehicle, and we would depart before anyone knew of the old Russian’s assassination. As you see, Pablo, I was more than complicit in his death.

The operation was a success of sorts – Mercader managed to kill Trotsky at long last – but it did not go exactly as we had planned. I later read in the press how the attack had happened in Trotsky’s study as he was reading some work supposedly written by Mercader. When Mercader was close enough, he plunged an ice pick into the older man’s head, but Trotsky did not allow himself to be so easily killed. He screamed a heaven-rending cry and struggled with Mercader even as he was bleeding from the head. Soon Trotsky’s bodyguards had encircled the assassin, and he had not had the courage to take his own life. The assassin then cried out, “I want to see my mother.”

As the police vehicles started to arrive with their screeching sirens, Caridad and I made our getaway.

“I hope he died as a martyr,” she said, “rather than choosing to live as a traitor.”

I rented a small house in Lomas de Chapultepec in order to have a place to make love to my Mariana. She was always in a cheerful demeanor and gave herself to love with a seemingly relentless passion. I looked forward to our meetings with expectation and delight. To tell you the truth, David, I had the sense that I was falling in love with her. Even when I was not with her, all I could think about was her pale luminescent body, her flowery aroma, her perfect silhouette. Suddenly I was inspired to write verses of love. She was half my age, however, and I could never forget that. The relationship was ultimately doomed from the start just like my relationship with Delia del Carril was also doomed, and for similar reasons --- the vast disparity in age. I am sure that with the years I shall have to replace Delia, What I wondered sometimes when I was in bed with Mariana was whether she was the one to become the replacement.

We made several trips with Mariana – to Cuernavaca, Acapulco, Guadalajara and even to New York City. I wondered how her husband could be so naïve and did not realize we had a reckless romance. Mariana had confided that she always told her husband when she disappeared that she was merely traveling with me in her capacity as my secretary. In retrospect, I cannot understand why Mariana went through such an elaborate charade or why she let us have such a long relationship before she acted. After all, there were no Basque parents, no cuckolded husband, no love for the aging Pablo Neruda. There was only a spy whose only intention was to kill me. Why she waited so long to show her true stripes is frankly beyond me.

One night in the house on Lomas de Chapultepec I fell asleep after many hours of relentless passion. Suddenly someone cried out in the night in an effort to rouse me, and I realized that it was Mariana's voice. She had waited until I was sound asleep and had taken the revolver I always keep next to me on my nightstand.

"Wake up!" she cried out, still undressed. "Get up, you despicable worm! The ghost of the murdered Nationalist soldier Pancho Salazar has come to avenge his death. Your executioner shall be a naked woman."

I did not fully comprehend what was happening. I rose from my sleep, a little groggy, and looked at Mariana holding the six-shooter in her right hand, pointing it at my head.

"What is it? I don't understand. What are you doing with that revolver? Have you gone mad?"

"Beg," Mariana commanded. "Beg for your very life, you miserable dog. Pray that I don't torture you like you tortured so many Nationalist heroes, including my brother Pancho Salazar."

I began to rise from my bed, wanting to tell her I had nothing to do with her brother's death, but Mariana warned me not to move.

"Don't move! you son-of-a-bitch," she ordered. "Didn't you realize the murder of Pancho Salazar and four-thousand priests would be avenged?"

"I assure you I had nothing to do with your brother's death nor with that of the priests. I never even so much as discharged a single bullet throughout the entire war. I was a simple diplomat working at the Chilean embassy."

"Did you think you could just take me, without paying any price?" Mariana asked me, "That it would all be so easy...Don't you see that you are worse than the Republican soldiers? Don't you see that you relentlessly advocated for the success of the Communists, sending my brother to his grave? And now that you are in Mexico, how could I possibly let you get away from simple justice?"

"You know that I love you," I responded. "After all this time, you must know it with certainty. I have even begun to write poems about you. I have recently finished "Song of Mariana." I thought it would be a surprise. Would you like me to read it now? I don't even have to read it, for it is etched in my memory. I plead with you to spare my life because in killing me you shall not only kill a man. You will be killing poetry instead."

Suddenly her face softened. She started sobbing and dropped the gun.

"You've taught me about poetry all along. If I haven't killed you in all this time, it is because I couldn't bring myself to do it. In some strange way I love you too but I hope you understand our love is impossible. No love born of hatred can last for long, for it is polluted from the start. Could you write a poem for my brother and send it in the mail? I shall forever be grateful for it."

I was glad to know Angelica had safely taken my illustrations of *Canto General* to you when she last met you in Buenos Aires. It is a monumental work – no doubt about it -- and there are rumors you are being considered for the Nobel Prize because of it. I know you've already received the Stalin Prize, which in my mind is probably the higher honor.

Sorry that I haven't written you in such a long time, Pablo, ever since you returned to Chile and I came back to Mexico. Frankly, I've had the sense that my mail has been intercepted for years. I didn't want to compromise either myself or you through an act of carelessness. You are facing political persecution in Chile, just like I am facing in Mexico. An offhand comment from me might be enough to implicate you in a crime. I'm not being an alarmist. It did not take much more for the Mexican authorities to incarcerate me at the Lecumberri prison with an eight-year sentence for having violated the Orwellian crime of "social dissolution." Since they couldn't marshal the evidence to convict me of an actual crime, they decided to invent a crime just for me and like-minded artists. The law is meant to muzzle every muralist who happens to be a Communist or exemplifies a bold, leftist cause. So be forewarned Pablo Neruda: you are now a persona non grata in Mexico City as well as Madrid.

I shall be eternally grateful for the poem you wrote denouncing my initial incarceration, but I want to tell you some of what followed. After you left Mexico, I was convicted of violating Article 145 of the Mexican Penal Code, a law that is so wide ranging and ambiguous that it could be applied to any act of organized political protest. Those in power bitterly complained that I was the mastermind behind certain massive strikes conducted by railroad workers as well as educators. The accusation was calumnious and outlandish.

In order to suppress the strikes, thousands of strikers were incarcerated or killed. When I became President of the Nationalist Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners, the Lopez Mateos regime pounced upon me and sent me to the notorious "Black Palace" without trial. They claimed I was engaging in "social dissolution" for some unspecified act of subversion, but I suppose it had more to do with my murals than with anything I had said using words. In particular, they had been incensed when I used a mural to complain about the violent repression of a railroad union whose members were imprisoned by the thousands. Those in power were trying to crush not an act but an idea. It was the artist, not the political activist, that they feared and sought to silence.

They couldn't imprison my murals, could they, Pablo? There is no question that they tried. They prevented the completion of certain of my murals, destroyed others, warned me not to paint murals with an overt Communist message. But by incarcerating me, they achieved their final and greatest goal. There is no way to paint a mural in a ten foot by ten foot prison cell, so I was left to work on easel paintings. At the time I was surprised that the prison guards even allowed me to continue painting small pieces. After all, why make my life easier for me than it could have been? But in retrospect, it makes perfect sense. They were trying to domesticate me as an artist, to make me realize I could make a decent amount of money by painting works commissioned by the American and Mexican bourgeoisie. And they wanted me to forever forget what they considered my incessant Communist prattle.

I must tell you, Pablo, that after all these years I still bleed for Catalonia. Two weeks ago, for some unknown reason, the guards moved me to a somewhat larger cell, with two other prisoners. One of them was a common criminal – he had stabbed his wife after finding her in bed with a lover – while the other was a political captive who called himself a revolutionary. I should have recognized the self-identified rebel, for I knew most of the active Trotskyites in Mexico. But with the passage of the years, like all of us, he had gradually decayed. Florentino Segovia was no longer the well-muscled former actor but an aging agitator with a few gray hairs and something of

a limp. Like me, he had been convicted of violating the law against “social dissolution.” Apparently he had given a speech to a few hundred students, quoting Trotsky’s statement that “by means of the armed struggle, the workers will come to understand the necessity of liquidating capitalist slavery.” For a speech full of nothing but political bromides and commonplace slogans, he had been sentenced to two years in prison.

I don’t remember exactly how it began but soon I found myself wrestling on the floor with the two other prisoners. Saturnino had said that with Stalin’s death, Stalinism was in the dustbin of history, its leader denounced for his cruelty everywhere, a monstrous tyrant who had been repudiated by the Soviet Union itself. On the other hand, claimed Saturnino, Trotskyism was alive and well, growing in places as disparate as Bolivia and Argentina. I replied that Stalinism was no more dead than Trotskyism and that Stalin had lived twenty more years than Trotsky. I also pointed out that Stalin had made more than twenty other nations Communist countries at the service of the proletariat. Without losing my composure, I coolly stated that the entire Latin American continent was ripe for a Soviet-style revolution as evidenced by what had just transpired in Cuba.

Saturnino put his right finger in my face and exclaimed, “Don’t confuse Castro with Stalin!” and then, without explanation, the man slapped me in the face.

“I know what you’ve done, Siqueiros. The whole world knows about it. You murdered Lev Davidovich! You should have been imprisoned decades ago. It’s not for ‘social dissolution’ you have been incarcerated, but because all the judges know about your crime.”

“Trotsky had been found guilty of plotting the assassination of Stalin by a competent tribunal. If someone planned to assassinate Franklin Roosevelt, don’t you think the Americans would promptly hang him?”

“Roosevelt hasn’t engaged in a great purge of everyone in his sights. Don’t you realize Stalin killed more than 700,000 people during his Great Terror?”

“Most of those executed confessed their crimes,” I retorted.

“Do you realize Stalin had signed a decree that made family members liable for crimes supposedly committed by their parents? Under such circumstances, what man would not confess?”

I punched him hard on the jaw and Saturnino fell to the ground. He was besmirching the reputation of the great Stalin. I knew Florentino had fought with the P.O.U.M. against the Communist cadres in Catalonia so a pent-up anger suddenly exploded within me. I pummeled him fiercely as he lay on the ground, then took him by the hair and smashed his head relentlessly against the floor. That’s when the other man intervened, pulling at my shoulders, and saying you’re going to kill the man. My actions had excited the compassion of a murderer. I struck him too and soon the two men were kicking me on the ground, as my nose and forehead bled.

At some point the guards appeared and took me back to my cell. A woman was called to wipe the blood off the floor.

I cried out in the silence of the prison.

¡Viva Cataluña! ¡Viva Mexico! ¡Viva Stalin!

(author’s postscript)

On September 4, 1970, Salvador Allende, Pablo Neruda’s Communist ally, won the Presidential election in Chile. On September 11, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet launched a coup d’etat against him and bombarded la Casa de la Moneda, the name of Chile’s Presidential Palace. It was soon reported that Allende had committed suicide rather than allow himself to be captured, although some believe he was murdered. After the coup, Neruda immediately decided to depart

for Mexico, where he had spent so many years as consul. His intention was to lead an international movement against the dictator, Augusto Pinochet, who took power immediately after the coup. General Pinochet was to remain as the leader of Chile until 1990.

Shortly after the coup, Neruda's house in Santiago was attacked and destroyed by Pinochet's soldiers and Neruda's beach house was also raided. At some point, soon after the coup, Neruda was rushed to the hospital, where he died on September 23, 1973 – less than two weeks after Pinochet took power. The official cause of death was reported as being cancer. Several years later, however, his driver announced that on the day of his death, Neruda had called him to report that someone at the hospital had injected him in the stomach with an unknown substance. A forensic investigation ensued, in which various doctors, after examining one of his teeth, found traces of the bacteria clostridium botulinum, which can cause botulism and is the most potent poison for humans. In 2016, the Chilean government acknowledged it was "clearly possible and highly probable" Neruda had been intentionally killed. The investigation continues and more evidence of foul play has been discovered. It may be that, like Trotsky, Pablo Neruda was killed to prevent him from using a foreign country as a launch pad to lead the opposition to a dictatorial regime.