

CUBAN HEROINE VILMA ESPÍN GUILLOIS DIES
THE BUILDER, FROM ITS FOUNDATIONS, OF A NEW SOCIETY
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VILMA has died. She has moved on to another category of the beloved. We are still struggling with the certainty of her death, after her stoic battle for life – which, in reality, has belonged for many years now not just to her but also to Cuba – and for whatever just idea that appealed to her in any part of the world; a life that she lavished wherever she thought it could be useful.

Vilma Espín Guillois is now a revolutionary icon, something that her simplicity never allowed her to even imagine, because one of her great personal and revolutionary virtues was that: modesty.

An exponent of the valor and intelligence of the vanguard women who emerged in the Centenary Generation has departed this life. One single detail will permit us to discover that her revolutionary activities unfolded during that historic time, the year of the centenary of José Martí. Specifically, when the student Rubén Batista died in Havana from injuries sustained in a student demonstration honoring the bust of Julio Antonio Mella, desecrated with impunity, on January 10, 1953. Like all of those young people who would later follow Fidel, she had spoken out against the perfidious military coup of March 10, 1952 perpetrated by Fulgencio Batista, although it is disagreeable for us, in these initial paragraphs dedicated to Vilma, to mention the name of the individual who led that cruel blow and established a bloody dictatorship.

Vilma, a pleasant and profound conversationalist, recounted one day that after that March 10, the first demonstrations began in the streets of her hometown of Santiago de Cuba — she did not mention that she was one of the organizers; in one of the first, if not the first, she took to the streets to protest the death of Rubén Batista. She told how on that occasion, a symbolic funeral was held in Santiago, and that action ended in a veritable battle against the dictator's thugs. The idea had been to take flowers to the cemetery, but it ended in the young revolutionaries taking shelter in cafés, throwing sugar bowls at the police.

That episode would be sufficient to include Vilma among the heroic revolutionary combatants of the Centenary Generation. Interestingly, during Rubén Batista's final moments at the Student Clinic in Calixto García Hospital, another Santiago native, Renato Guitart, met Fidel, and later became one of the advance party of the revolutionary movement that assaulted the Moncada Garrison that year. And during that action, the young Vilma,

hearing the shots without knowing what was happening, affirmed to her father in their home on San Jerónimo Street that the Moncada was being attacked. A few hours later, it was confirmed. Later, nothing would intimidate her from approaching one of the garrison's posts and asking the impossible, to be able to see the heroes. The response left her and the other women with her with no alternative other than to quickly retreat and even so, two of them were arrested. Her intuition and swift reactions allowed her to escape on a city bus and lose herself in the city until she was able to return home without being identified. The heroic clandestine combatant was emerging in the Heroic City.

During those days of horror, Santiago de Cuba took in, with an attitude of solidarity, the combatants pursued by Batista's soldiers, who had already murdered dozens of young people in the dungeons of the Moncada. Vilma's house, too, was open to take in and protect any of those heroic participants in the attack who sought refuge.

Acción Revolucionaria Oriental (Eastern Revolutionary Action), an organization created by Frank País, was the first that Vilma joined, as an active founder, after the assault on the Moncada. Later, it became the future 26th of July Revolutionary Movement where she would develop her talents as an organizer and combatant. The M-26-7 carried out the broadest and most daring range of tasks. It was a channel for her deep patriotic, social and humanistic sentiments. She herself reiterated on various occasions that in the initial years of her revolutionary youth, there were two events that deeply moved her: the Moncada attack on July 26, 1953, and History Will Absolve Me, making her realize that Fidel was a valiant leader and a man of ideas, with a consistent political development and great firmness of revolutionary principles.

And she – who was she? A young woman who was capable and educated in the broadest sense of the word. Her vocation and scientific interest, in the service of industrial development, joined with her love for the arts: music, song, painting and ballet, mainly. But she was also enthusiastic about sports, hence her successful performance as volleyball player and captain of the team at the University of Oriente. In addition, she was a fervent follower of José Martí, and she nourished her knowledge, in great detail, of the campaigns of the Mambí forces and the revolutionary intransigence of Antonio Maceo. Conversations with Vilma on these subjects were always marvelous, and not because of any bookish knowledge, but in terms of her sentiment, which was contagious given her communicative style. In her soft tone, with the cadence of her voice, loved and respected, she was capable of providing a fresco of our history, whether of the anticolonial struggles for independence, or as a republic, from the days of Julio Antonio Mella. Her education began at home. She was born in Santiago de Cuba on April 7, 1930, into a well-to-do family. She could have been a simple “society” girl,

but the education she received, together with her own sentiments and personality, made her a revolutionary leader. Her parents were generous and friendly people, understanding with their children —six— and left a trail of affection and respect among everyone from any background who knew them. In Santiago, Espín was referred to as the honorary consul of France, whose home was open to Haitian immigrants, so discriminated against by the elite society of that time. They brought up their children under the influence of their own example of austerity, human sensitivity and respect, without any type of barrier due to social, racial or religious background. Their children grew up according to the way they were and their personal inclinations with respect to choosing higher education, friendships, political positions and social and cultural activities.

For Vilma, once she was a mother, it was not difficult to create a home with similar characteristics, an exemplary one.

Education was always a premise in her home, and Vilma chose to study a scientific discipline in college: chemical/industrial engineering. Very few women were enrolled in that major. She conquered it magnificently, graduating on July 14, 1954, without neglecting her participation in the cultural and sporting events that she enjoyed at the University of Oriente, including her active participation in the University Choir. Upon graduating, she became one of the two first women chemical-industrial engineers in Cuba. That same year, she traveled to the United States for postgraduate study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in Boston. When she finished her course, she asked for instructions from the leadership of the 26th of July Movement, and the response was for her to head for Mexico to meet with Fidel and bring his orders and messages back to Cuba. That was the moment when the Granma expedition was being organized.

That was how Vilma's student life ended and her complete commitment to the Revolution began, without any time to exercise her solid training as an engineer.

Under the orders of Frank País, she participated in organizing the armed uprising of Santiago de Cuba that took place on November 30. She was a pillar in that essential action, planned to coincide with the arrival in Cuba from Mexico of the Granma expedition under the leadership of Commander Fidel Castro Ruz. Her serenity, courage and movement capability distinguish the role played by Vilma.

In January 1957 that the enemy detected her, and her home, which had become the headquarters of the Movement, was searched for the first time. Vilma had led a march of mothers in mourning, protesting the many murders committed by the dictatorship in a face-to-face confrontation with Batista's thugs, many of whom were the notorious torturers and merciless murderers of

the prisoners in the Moncada and whose criminal records had continued to grow.

There is one event in the history of the Revolution that is known all over the world. Vilma is present in it.

It was in February 1957 that Fidel summoned the clandestine leadership of the 26th of July Movement to a meeting in the Sierra Maestra mountains, and drafted a manifesto to the people of Cuba, informing them of the creation of the Rebel Army and the purpose of its struggle. It was also at that time that the transcendental interview of Fidel by U.S. journalist Herbert Mathews took place, demonstrating to the world that Batista government was lying when it said the revolutionary leader was dead. Vilma was present at the meeting and actively participated in carrying out the orders that Fidel gave Frank País; later, she went completely underground.

She was subsequently designated a member of the National Leadership of the 26th of July Movement, and shortly before Frank País was assassinated, the essential “Déborah” [her clandestine name] was appointed as the movement’s coordinator in Oriente province, a task she carried out until June 1958. The danger of her situation as head of clandestine revolutionary missions became unsustainable, requiring a change of location for her struggle, and she joined the Rebel Army, becoming the legendary guerrilla fighter in the Frank País 2nd Eastern Front, commanded by Raúl Castro Ruz.

Déborah, Alicia, Mónica, were the names she used while operating underground, and she became Mariela, the brave and efficient rebel combatant, charged during the month of July 1958 with tasks supporting the leadership, related to the process of returning a group of U.S. citizens who had been kidnapped. Later, she was assigned – among many other responsibilities – with attention to and organization of the clandestine movement in the eastern municipalities located in the vast territorial expanse of the Rebel Army’s 2nd Front. That was essential, given that those areas provided indispensable logistical support for ensuring combat actions. As with every task she carried out in her life, she carried this one out conscientiously.

BUILDER OF A NEW SOCIETY

In the early days of the triumph of the Revolution, Vilma and Raúl married. At a time like this, 45 years ago, Déborah, their firstborn, was one of the first to enter, as one infant more, the Los Compañeritos Day Care Center on the ground floor of the Ministry of Labor. The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) had already been created (August 23, 1960) and the task of organizing Day Care Centers was given by the Revolution to the FMC under the direction of Wilma Espín. Prior to that, likewise in the early days of the Revolution—in 1959 – still wearing campaign uniform, as Déborah, Vilma was

involved in various tasks as a leader of the 26th of July Movement, and a group approached her with the idea of exchanging ideas and – so as not to be left behind – to make Revolution by working voluntarily. She took that concern to Fidel who, with his brilliant vision of the role of women in society and history, saw the importance of a social movement that would include half of the Cuban population.

In 1959, Vilma created and presided over the Auspices Committee in order to participate in the 1st Latin American Congress for the Rights of Women and Children, convened by the International Democratic Federation of Women. This congress took place in Santiago de Chile. It was a platform that would serve as a base for unifying all the existing revolutionary women's groups at that time.

In Cuba the work never stopped. Vilma knew how to lead and thus created cadres that would form a broad platform to take the organization to the farthest corners of the island and from there be nourished by grass-roots women who, up until then, had never participated in the country's social and political life.

On August 23, 1960, after intensive preparatory work nationwide – in rural, mountainous or swampy areas – the Federation of Cuban Women was officially created (FMC). During the first 15 months of work, the nascent organization, still embryonic, had mobilized women en masse for the construction of schools and hospitals; to collect up and take care of unsupported children wandering the streets at the triumph of the Revolution; to improve living standards in the so-called “destitute” barrios; and other social tasks.

Vilma was elected president of the FMC by its founding assembly, a position ratified at every FMC Congress, from the first in 1962 to the seventh in 2000.

The history of the FMC is an important part of Vilma's life. Although she did not exercise her career as an industrial engineer, she had a voice in programs of the Revolution of a technical or economic nature. But her central task was political and social in the widest sense.

The initial tasks of the new organization were to promote educational, ideological and cultural training for women. Campesino women arrived in Havana from the Sierra Maestra and other remote areas and took classes in hairdressing and dressmaking. At least to start off with, every woman would have a sewing machine. There was a meeting in Sports City. The jubilation was extraordinary; it was the incipient beginning of a road that took thousands of campesino women to a different life, one of full participation in the country's economy.

In the wake of those courses the most humble women were offered other studies as the first forms of participation outside of the home. Those women, who had never left the narrow family environment, discovered a new world. Vilma was one of Fidel's most enthusiastic collaborators in promoting knowledge and cultural education and, logically, she began with literacy teaching. Thus she was a member of the National Literacy Commission and placed the new mass organization at the center of the colossal battle waged for all the people. With that goal fulfilled, others were taken on, such as the follow-up, battles for sixth and ninth grade and classrooms for adult education, all of them filled with women. Vilma's work was not passive. Someone like her who, at risk of death, drove all over Oriente province in tasks as a clandestine combatant, or walked through the streets on difficult functions as a member of the M-26-7 National Directorate, couldn't spend her time behind a desk. Thus Vilma toured the entire country, and took part in mobilizations with grass-roots delegations. She attended to women who were part of the Rebel Army and young people incorporated into defense tasks.

Vilma Espín gave special attention to women's military training, including their incorporation as professionals in the Revolutionary Armed Forces. No task on that front could be more complex for a woman who did what she did, pursued by the brutal dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, the unconditional servant of U.S. imperialism.

As a cornerstone of the unity of women all over the world in favor of revolutionary causes, internationalism is fundamental and would find in Vilma a promoter and participant in every action in that context. The revolutionary war in South Vietnam for its liberation and the equally heroic resistance of the then Democratic Republic of Vietnam in defense of its sovereignty in the face of the merciless U.S. aggression, had in Vilma an effective collaborator, as did members of women's movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America. To that end, among other things, she created the Fe del Valle Cadres School, currently the FMC Further Education Center.

Her struggle to attain an understanding of gender equality began in the early days of the triumph of the Revolution. With that objective, she headed the great ideological battle that was being waged in the country to eliminate the retrograde effect of culture inherited from the past on gender roles, with its consequent prejudices, erroneous beliefs, traditional sexual stereotypes and taboos, in order to make real the revolutionary principles that condemn every kind of discrimination of a social, ethnic, gender, religious, sexual orientation origin and any other expression of inequality or pejorative treatment.

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The list, still brief, of the values of this revolutionary woman who has

just died, demonstrates to us that we should take into account the great loss we have suffered. However, the knowledge of her thoughts, actions and projection will be a school for actively continuing her example. The organizations, national and international projects in which Vilma personally participated throughout the history of the Revolution are numerous.

Someone like her who was so capable and creative in an underground revolutionary organization was just the same in a legislative organization. It is not about a list of responsibilities.

However important these may have been, the valid point is the work she carried out in her duties, whether as a deputy at the National Assembly and member of the Council of State, the highest governmental organization in the country, or as part of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba, of which she was a founding member and at the Second Congress (1980) became a reserve member of the Political Bureau. At the 3rd Congress, she was promoted to effective membership, a responsibility she carried out until 1991.

A special chapter should be dedicated to her duties of a diplomatic nature, or those connected to foreign relations on all continents at different times and at the head of Cuban delegations.

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

As has been mentioned above, in 1959 Vilma and the then Commander Raúl Castro Ruz, head of the Frank País 2nd Eastern Front and, from October 1959, minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, were married. They raised a family currently consisting of four children and eight grandchildren. Vilma always trusted in the value of setting an example for the education and raising of children, and was consistent with this principle in the education and raising of her own children. She was a mother, friend and comrade. Her children and grandchildren love her and will continue to love her, admire her and will continue to admire her; even more so now, for her legacy: the wisdom she possessed in creating harmony, the most just and humane sentiments, with a steely strength of character and her revolutionary intransigence in the defense of important decisions, in defending the principles and the work of the Revolution, both with respect to great tasks and in important day-to-day work.

Vilma Espín Guillois was an exceptional Cuban woman; a representative of the most elevated human values dedicated with creativity and passion to her homeland, to the Revolution that she lived from her heroic and risky beginnings with Fidel's leadership; to her family, and to all our people, with the generosity that distinguishes all great men and women.

Hasta siempre Vilma, the builder, from its very foundations, of a new society.

[English translation by Granma International]