

## INTERLUDE

Yesterday, on Tuesday, I had a bundle of cables with news about the meeting in Japan of the most highly industrialized powers. I shall leave that material and take it up some other time, if it does not grow cold and stale. I decided to take a rest. I chose to get together with Gabo and his wife, Mercedes Barcha, who are visiting Cuba until the 11th. How I wanted to chat with them, to recall almost 50 years of sincere friendship!

Our news agency, as suggested by Che, had just been born, and it hired, among others, the services of a modest Colombian journalist named Gabriel García Márquez. Neither Prensa Latina nor Gabo had the slightest idea that there would be a Nobel Prize; or maybe this son of a small-town Colombian post-office telegraph operator buried in the banana plantations of a Yankee company had some inkling, with that "Brobdingnagian" imagination of his. He shared his lot with a bunch of siblings, as was the custom, still his father, a Colombian with the privilege of being employed thanks to the telegraph keys, was able to give him an education.

I experienced the opposite. The post office with its telegraph keys and the little public school in Birán were the only facilities in that hamlet that were not owned by my father; all the rest of the goods and services of any economic value belonged to Don Ángel, and for that reason I was able to go to school. I never had the privilege of getting to know Aracataca, the small town where Gabo was born, but I certainly had the privilege of celebrating my 70th birthday in Birán, with him as my guest.

It was also a fortuitous circumstance that in 1948 when, on our initiative, a Latin American Students' Congress was being held in Colombia, the capital of that country was also the place where, following the dictates of the U.S., the Latin American States were meeting to establish the OAS.

It was an honor that the Colombian students introduced me to Gaitán. This man offered his support and gave us pamphlets of what came to be known as the Peace Prayer, a speech made on the occasion of the Silent March, that massive and impressive demonstration which streamed through Bogotá protesting the massacres of peasants by the Colombian oligarchy. Gabo took part in that march.

In his book *Transparency of Emanuel*, Germán Sánchez, our current Cuban ambassador in Venezuela, transcribes paragraphs quoting Gabo's words on that episode.

It was chance until this point.

Our friendship is the result of a relationship cultivated over the course of many years, in hundreds of conversations which were always pleasant to me. Talking with García Márquez and Mercedes whenever they came to Cuba –and it was more than once a year– became a healing experience for the tremendous tension, subconscious but constant, that assailed a revolutionary Cuban leader.

In Colombia itself, on the occasion of the 4th Ibero-American Summit, the hosts organized a horse-drawn carriage tour of the walled city of Cartagena, a kind of Habana Vieja, a protected historical relic. The Cuban comrades in charge of security had told me it wasn't advisable for me to participate in the scheduled tour. I thought that this concern was excessive since, due to too much compartmentalization, the people giving me this information were unaware of concrete facts. I always respected their professionalism and cooperated with them.

I called Gabo, who was close by, and jokingly told him: "Get on this carriage with us so they don't start

shooting!" And that's what he did. In the same vein, I told Mercedes who stayed behind at the starting point: "You are going to be the youngest widow!" She hasn't forgotten! The horse took off, limping along from its heavy load; its hoofs skidding across the pavement.

Later, I found out that the same thing had happened there than in Santiago de Chile, when a TV camera hiding an automatic weapon was pointed at me during a press conference, and the mercenary operating it didn't dare fire. In Cartagena, they had rifles with telescopic sights and automatic weapons positioned for ambush at a spot in the walled area, and once again the fingers which were to squeeze the trigger grew stiff. The excuse was that Gabo's head obstructed the view of the target.

Yesterday, during our conversation, I recalled this and I asked him and Mercedes –an Olympic champion of facts and figures– about a number of events experienced both inside Cuba and abroad where we were present. The New Latin American Cinema Foundation, created by Cuba and presided over by García Márquez, located in the old Quinta Santa Bárbara –historically significant for both positive and negative developments occurring in the first quarter of the last century– and the School for New Latin American Cinema run by that Foundation and located in the proximity of San Antonio de los Baños, took up some of our meeting.

Birri, with his then long black beard, which today is as white as snow, and many other Cuban and foreign personalities passed through our reminiscences.

I gained respect and admiration for Gabo because of his capacity for organizing the school in such a meticulous fashion, without overlooking a single detail. I initially had certain prejudices about this intellectual with a marvelous sense of fantasy; I had no idea how much realism dwelled in his mind.

Scores of events in and out of Cuba, at which we both were present, came up while we talked. So many things can happen in decades!

As it's only natural, two hours were not enough for our conversation. Our meeting had begun at 11:35 a.m. I invited them to lunch, something I had not done with any of my visitors during these past almost two years, since I had never thought of it. I realized that I was really on vacation and I told them that. I improvised. I solved the problem. They had their lunch, and as for me, I followed my special diet with discipline, without deviating an inch, not to add years to my life, but productivity to my time.

No sooner had they arrived that they gave me a small, lovely present wrapped up in bright, attractively colored paper. It contained tiny volumes a little bigger than post cards, but shorter. Each one was between 40 and 60 pages long, printed in small but legible letters. They are the speeches given in Stockholm, capital of Sweden, by five of the Nobel Laureates for Literature in the last 60 years. "So you have something to read" –Mercedes told me as she gave them to me.

I asked them for more details about the gift before they left at five in the afternoon. "I have had the most wonderful time today since my illness almost two years ago" –I told them forthrightly. That's how I felt.

"There will be other times", Gabo replied.

But my curiosity continued. A little later, as I was walking, I asked a comrade to bring the gift. Conscious of the rhythm with which the world has been changing in the last few decades, I wondered: What did some of those brilliant writers, who lived prior to this turbulent and uncertain era, think about humanity?

The five Nobel Prize Laureates selected for the small collection of speeches, which hopefully one day our compatriots will be able to read, in chronological order were:

William Faulkner (1949)

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Pablo Neruda (1971)

Gabriel García Márquez (1982)

John Maxwell Coetzee (2003)

Doris Lessing (2007)

Gabo didn't like making speeches. He spent months searching for facts, I recall, in agony over the words he had to say upon receiving the Prize. The same thing had happened with the short speech he had to make at the dinner in his honor following the presentation of the Prize. If that had been his profession, for sure Gabo would have been dead from a heart attack.

It must not be forgotten that the Nobel is awarded in the capital of a country that has not been ravaged by war in more than 150 years, ruled by a constitutional monarchy and governed by a Social-Democratic Party where a man as noble as Olof Palme was assassinated for his spirit of solidarity with the poor of the world. Gabo's mission was not an easy one.

The Swedish institution, which cannot be suspected of being pro-communist, granted the Nobel Prize to William Faulkner, an inspired and rebellious American writer; to Pablo Neruda, a Communist Party member who received it during the glorious days of Salvador Allende, when fascism was trying to gain control of Chile, and to Gabriel García Márquez, one of the brilliant and prestigious writers of our era.

One doesn't need to say how Gabo was thinking. It is enough to simply transcribe the final paragraphs of his speech, a jewel of prose, upon receiving the Nobel Prize on December 10, 1982, while Cuba, dignified and heroic, was resisting the Yankee blockade.

"On a day like today, my master William Faulkner said in this place: "I decline to accept the end of man," he said.

"I would feel unworthy of standing in this place that was his, if I were not fully aware that the colossal tragedy he refused to recognize thirty-two years ago is now, for the first time since the beginning of humanity, nothing more than a simple scientific possibility. Faced with this awesome reality that must have seemed a mere utopia through all of human time, we, the inventors of tales, who will believe anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to engage in the creation of the opposite utopia.

"A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have at last and forever a second opportunity on earth."

**Fidel Castro Ruz**

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