

38. Pablo Dittborn

On October 5, the day of the plebiscite, at that time, I was living in Buenos Aires. I had left Chile in February 1974 and went into exile in Peru, where I lived for 6 or 7 months. Due to circumstances in Chilean-Peruvian politics, we had to leave Peru and abandon our life as exiles in Lima. So I went to live in Argentina, where I worked in the publishing industry for 20 years. During the days leading up to the plebiscite, I had gone to the Frankfurt Book Fair, I believe it was the Frankfurt Book Fair. Then I went to Barcelona because I was invited to a meeting with a publishing group that wanted to open offices in Buenos Aires, and they had recommended talking to me to see if they could hire me, so I went. While I was there, I realized that my original plan, which was to return from Barcelona to Buenos Aires and then travel to Santiago de Chile the next day to arrive on the 5th and vote, I found that there were no available flights, no possibility of a reservation. So I started visiting travel agencies, and they helped me from the Ediciones B office, which was the publishing company, to secure a ticket. And suddenly, they announced that the only alternative to arrive in Santiago on October 5th at a convenient time, as the voting closes eight hours after the polling stations open, which corresponded to 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

So I had to accept that only option. And that only option was exhausting because I had to go through Barcelona, Madrid, Madrid, Miami, Miami, Guayaquil, Guayaquil, Santiago. The inconvenience was that I didn't have a visa to enter the United States, which was required even for transit. I had been to the United States before and had a visa, but it didn't occur to me to bring the old passport where the visa was stamped because I wasn't considering going there. So I boarded an Iberia plane where, by chance, they didn't ask me to present the passport with the visa. At the airport, they allowed me to board, and when I arrived in Miami, it was announced that apparently, I wasn't the only one traveling without a visa. So they sent me to a small room where a gentleman entered. He told me he was an immigration officer and that he had to ask me a series of questions, offering an interpreter if I wanted to feel more secure, which I accepted and thanked him for because I didn't want to make any mistakes. Then the interpreter came, and very kindly, he translated everything I said and everything they said to me. They told me, "Well, okay, this will mean some kind of fine for the airline," and that I would have to be confined to a special room for this type of infraction. Turns out it was very pleasant, very comfortable, with places to sit, armchairs where you could even sleep, with all kinds of sandwiches and drinks, except for alcohol. There was a television showing the news, where I saw several times news about what was about to happen in Chile. There were interviews with Ricardo Lagos, one of the leaders of the Chilean opposition. Well, as inhabitants of an underdeveloped country like ours, I felt like going to the Duty-Free shop and buying something. So I asked for permission, and they told me it was absolutely prohibited. Then it occurred to me to tell them that I had a problem, that I had an ulcer, and I needed to drink milk, which was not available at the time. So they assigned me a guard and took me to a place where I could have a glass of milk. I asked the guard for permission to enter, and he said, "That's good." And naturally, I did my shopping, which must have been any unnecessary trinkets, but to bring as gifts to my ex-wife and children, right? So they were very kind. It was very kind. I never felt fear, discomfort, confinement, nothing. The truth is, nothing at all. An amazing treatment, very different from what I was accustomed to in similar situations in Latin America.

And when the boarding time came, which must have been around 11 or 12 at night, a police guard accompanied me. Something like that. He had my passport. We approached the airplane gate, where there was already a line of passengers waiting to board, and the guard gave some instructions. No one

was allowed to enter the plane until he boarded with me and handed my passport to the head flight attendant, saying, "You must retain this passport until the plane has closed its doors and is about to take off." The flight attendant looked at him with a puzzled expression, but she obeyed and did as instructed, and the police officer left. I sat down, and the flight attendant approached me and asked what I had done, what kind of evil or illegal crime I had committed. Well, I briefly explained to her what had happened, and that was it. Then people started boarding, and everyone was looking at me as if I were a deportee or a criminal or something, but I didn't worry too much about it. The flight took off. They returned my passport to me. We landed in Guayaquil around X in the morning, with terrible heat and humidity, and then the flight continued, and we arrived in Santiago around 9 or 10 in the morning. I went through immigration procedures, retrieved my luggage, and hurried to take a taxi to my mother's house, where I left the suitcase and walked to the polling station, which was about seven or eight blocks away. I managed to arrive there around noon.

I voted happily for having achieved it because I always thought that any delay in the flight, all this effort would be in vain. Well, and I went to sleep, and I went to sleep, and I must have slept practically the whole day. Naturally, I found out about the results around 8 or 9 in the evening. I watched some television, that scene where General Matthei, the commander-in-chief of the Air Force, arrives at La Moneda Palace and before entering and making an official announcement, acknowledges the victory of the NO campaign, and this generates... I don't know, there was tremendous expectation and the big question of whether Pinochet and the rest of the Military Junta would recognize it. And it seems they had no other choice because the margin would have been wide enough for them to do so. So, well, I fell asleep until the next day with crazy enthusiasm, thinking that this Mr. Pinochet would be gone in 15 more minutes and we would once again become a serious, decent, free, and democratic country. But no, it wasn't like that. The electoral timetable included presidential elections a year later, and we would have to once again form an electoral coalition to win the government.

The next day, very early in the morning, due to the time difference we have with Argentina during certain periods of the year, I received a call from Bernardo Neustadt's radio station. He was the most listened-to political commentator in Argentina, and I had met him on two occasions because I had taken Ricardo Lagos to his show in Buenos Aires. So he had my contact information and he located me, asking for my opinion on the election results. Naturally, I was euphoric that Pinochet had to go, either back home or to jail, we would see where. But this government had simply come to an end. It had been defeated, and it had been defeated with a pencil, not with weapons, violence, or anything brutal. Just with a simple pencil in a challenging plebiscite. We couldn't do much advertising campaign. We had restrictions. We had fear, which is the main weapon used by the military in these cases, right? And even so, the difference was substantial. That was my plebiscite journey. I remember it because it was exhausting, and it was curious that it caught me in Europe, where I am not usually, and my plan was simply to have come from Buenos Aires. That was disrupted, and it ended happily and very well.