

## 17. Pepa Guzman

Well, we're talking about the plebiscite of '88. I'm going to give you a bit of historical context because, in essence, I was involved in an organization called "La Cruzada por la Participación Ciudadana" (The Crusade for Citizen Participation). This initiative began in January '88, led by someone like Mónica Jiménez, who was a very influential opinion leader in the country. She was also closely connected to the Church, which was significant at that time since the Church in Chile held an important role and prestige. She created this Crusade for Citizen Participation and called upon a series of individuals. The idea was to establish a network of volunteers throughout Chile to carry out civic education. Essentially, the aim was to work with people on their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Let's consider the context: we were in the midst of a dictatorship, with a lot of fear, misinformation, and widespread ignorance. After 17 years of dictatorship, and at that time, 16 years, fear, repression, and the lack of education and media coverage resulted in significant levels of ignorance and fear among the population.

So, they created this foundation, which later became a foundation called "Participa," but at that time it was known as "La Cruzada por la Participación Ciudadana" (The Crusade for Citizen Participation). I was invited to join as a volunteer because the idea was to establish a network of volunteers throughout Chile, working at the community, county and regional levels, creating various spaces.

Well, I joined as a volunteer, and in March, they asked if I could work with them full-time as a supervisor. In other words, we formed and recruited volunteers from all over Chile. In my case, I worked in the northern zone of Santiago, from Recoleta to Til-Til, and I also had Las Condes because I lived there. We began operations, recruiting volunteers and appointing local leaders in each community and region. We conducted training courses on weekends in Punta de Tralca, at the Casa Retiro de las monjas (Retreat House of the nuns), which I'm sure many have heard of. It was the epicenter of many events, including gatherings of the No campaign. We had a marathon with 200 volunteers over a weekend and spent an entire month of weekends conducting training sessions. The idea was, basically, to organize activities through our volunteers that would help people overcome their fears and learn to vote. Therefore, the training we provided was crucial. On one hand, it had to be highly didactic, and on the other hand, we encouraged the volunteers to adopt a consensus-seeking mindset.

We didn't directly seek to convince people to vote for one side or the other. For us, the important thing was to encourage people to have the courage to vote on October 5, which was the voting day, and to vote correctly. It was a way for us to ensure that people participated, as the political parties were concerned with the options of Yes and No. However, I must be honest, I didn't know anyone in the Crusade who supported the Yes side. We all had a clear orientation towards the No. Well, that experience was beautiful because it allowed me to meet many people and have significant experiences. As I mentioned before, I was a supervisor here in Las Condes, where you could see that the political and economic power had always been concentrated. Therefore, people in these communities were less fearful compared to the popular neighborhoods in the northern zone. In the end, I left Las Condes and focused entirely on working in the northern zone of Santiago, conducting seminars and courses.

It was quite funny because in Las Condes, if you wanted to gather a group of people, it was super easy because people would invite you to their homes, and there wasn't much fear. However, it was different in the northern zone. I had to engage in conversations and convince the Church, particularly individuals

within the Church, to open up the parish spaces for us to use as community spaces in each commune. In fact, in the Conchalí commune, the parish priest played a crucial role for me. He was from Recoleta and Conchalí and provided significant support for our various activities. From March to December, we worked extensively on volunteer training and reaching out to the citizens, teaching them how to vote and helping them overcome their fear. There was a lot of fear at that time. In December, we were asked to participate in the electoral committee, where we conducted a quick count, which I believe was a crucial element in General Matthei from the Air Force ultimately acknowledging the victory of the NO campaign. That moment was filled with great tension. Well, I'll tell you more about it later.

Well, my role was, in essence, to transform my house into the rapid counting center for Las Condes. My father and brother were responsible for receiving the ballots, and we had a photocopier and a fax machine. At that time, we would work with a quite basic technical setup, and people would come to our house. The process involved us being assigned specific tables at certain polling stations. So we had to find volunteers who would be present during the vote count at those tables. They would write down the results on a small piece of paper, and then transfer those results to a more official form. That form would then be delivered to a specific house or multiple houses within the commune. The results from that table would be transmitted via fax or telephone, and at the same time, they would hand me the original ballot to safeguard. It was an epic and incredibly important undertaking for us. I was in charge of the entire northern zone of Santiago, all the way up to Til-Til. I was also responsible for safeguarding the original ballot. It was quite an epic and incredibly significant task for us. Just imagine, the magnitude of it all. I remember waking up very early that day, voting, and then dedicating myself fully to my role and function. I always think about it, that I was somewhat unconsciously but also tremendously energized, knowing that we were in a crucial moment for our country and that we were contributing in a simple and small way to the possibility of a return to democracy. It was a historic event, the chance to have the "No" win, and although we didn't know what would happen, we were convinced that this was the path to democracy.

I believe that the world saw us as quite naive at that time. Overthrowing a dictatorship through voting and the ballot was truly unprecedented. But we had the vitality and the conviction that we no longer wanted bloodshed in our country. We were all seeking the best way to end this tremendous dictatorship. As a former university student leader, I had personally experienced the hardships. I witnessed friends who are no longer with us, friends who were imprisoned. It wasn't an easy journey. Additionally, I was a student leader at the Pedagogical University of Chile, which became the Metropolitan University after the military intervention. So I had already had a significant and intense prior experience. But my conviction was clear: we had to strive for the return of democracy in a peaceful manner. And that's exactly what we were doing.

The actual day was good, as I mentioned earlier. I woke up very early. I think I was one of the first people at the polling station to cast my vote. Then I went to the office and waited there until it was time to start. In the morning, the first thing we did was go to the polling stations in the communities where we were working to check that the tables had been set up and that everything was running smoothly, as much as possible given the circumstances. In fact, we have a mutual friend, Meg, who was very helpful to me. Meg accompanied me, and since she was an international observer, she allowed me to enter the polling stations at times with her support and her credentials. That made my job much easier. It was quite impressive because you had built a network of volunteers, and you had people in all the polling stations. So, you arrived there with the fear of getting caught, but also with the determination to fulfill

this task. It was a clandestine operation, you know. I think I lived that day with adrenaline, and we all lived with adrenaline throughout the day because at times you would exchange signals with others. Is everything okay? Is everything going according to plan? First, we had to confirm that things were progressing smoothly. If we noticed any irregularities, we would contact and report them to the appropriate authorities. Then we would observe that the polling stations had been set up and have visual confirmation of that. We would wait for the voting to take place and then for the crucial moment of the vote count. I remember going back to the office with our mutual friend, Meg. In the afternoon, the situation became a bit more dangerous as we went out to the polling stations to observe the vote count and coordinate the delivery of information to the designated collection points. We had to supervise the process, traveling through different territories. Well, you know Chile, so you understand what it means to travel from Recoleta to Til-Til. Luckily, I had access to a car provided by my family, so I could move around, but it was quite a journey. Moreover, back then the roads were one-way. No, no, I mean, there was one lane for each direction. We are talking about the Chile of the '80s, not today's Chile. It had narrow roads, country lanes, and everything. Well, I think that event, personally, I sometimes think and say that I was unconscious, and I experienced it as if I was unaware. All I wanted was for this to succeed.

Well, finally, they began the vote count. The story I just shared was not easy; it was tense. There were parts that were very tense. Additionally, we had representatives from both the Yes and No campaigns in each polling station. What I can tell you, Jennifer, is that people were fully committed to this task, whether it was for the Yes or No option. But I can tell you that those supporting the No campaign were completely devoted to it. It was incredibly emotional to witness what was happening and to feel it. Despite the high tension, there was also a sense of hope that this would help us return to democracy. You could tell by people's eyes, their gestures, everyone was trying to support each other. I remember the volunteers bringing me a sandwich at lunchtime so I could eat something. It was a very powerful experience. Well, on that day, as I mentioned, the polling stations started to close, and we began to deliver the information to the data collection centers. Personally, I was traveling through the northern zone of Santiago, covering Recoleta, Conchalí, Lampa, Til-Til, Independencia, and all those areas. At the same time, I was entrusted with the original ballots to bring them to the center of Santiago, or rather around the center of Santiago, where we had a safe house and were collecting all the information. It was important because it represented the true results. We were in the process of closing the polling stations, compiling the information, and all that. Clearly, a definitive trend favoring the No campaign could be seen in the vote counts and everything. Then, at one point, the military decided to close off the center of Santiago. They cordoned it off. I remember that I was already on my way back with the ballots, and there were many of them. I was alone in my car, and suddenly, I don't know why, I thought I might have problems. So, I parked the car and hid all the ballots inside my body, inside my clothes, you understand? I was wearing blue jeans, and I put the ballots everywhere on my body, inside my body. Don't ask me what came over me. I remember driving through Pio Nono to cross the Pio Nono bridge when a military patrol stopped me. They asked me to get out of the car. I knew I had the ballots; I could feel them inside my body, so my heart was racing. Well, these guys removed the car seats, checked the engine, searched the entire car, emptied everything, but they didn't find anything because I had everything hidden inside me. Then they told me I could go. I remember getting back into my car, crossing the Pio Nono bridge, and at some point, I stopped and burst into tears because of the tension and everything that had just happened. Then I arrived at the designated location to deliver the ballots

and waited in our office, which was located on Vicuña Mackenna, Almirante Simpson, to see how everything would unfold. I had completed my task, and now I was witnessing the outcome of it all.

Now, I remember that in the morning, when I arrived at the office, there were many international observers who were going to be deployed to different areas and all. And I remember they were really scared, very afraid of what could happen. And when I came back, it was already in the afternoon. I'm talking about 8 p.m., 9 p.m., around that time. These observers were getting more and more frightened and tense because they had cordoned off the city center. Imagine that. And then, with the vote count, the quick count from the CEL and the reliable sample we had, I believe that's what made General Matthei, the Air Force general, because up until that moment, the government hadn't announced the official results, everything was silent, silent, silent. We knew we were winning, but everything was being kept quiet. Well, the General Matthei acknowledges that it seemed like the "no" vote was winning. And you can imagine what started happening, troop movements, everything in motion. Yes, I remember that once it was clear that the "No" had won, I went out, I don't remember the exact time, but it was early in the morning, maybe 1 a.m., 2 a.m., and I left the office. We were all there, those who had worked throughout this whole period, and we walked along the Alameda, celebrating the victory. It was magical, powerful. It felt like we were experiencing something unreal. That was on the same day. That was my day.

I'm moved by everything I experienced in that year 1988 because we managed to overthrow the dictatorship peacefully, knowing that there were costs and that many people were lost along the way. But it was incredibly powerful to live through that, to have achieved the return to democracy through the ballot box, and to have worked throughout the year to help people overcome their fear. People were very afraid; they didn't dare say anything. That's why we focused on teaching them to vote without discussing their preference, but to overcome their fear and have the courage to vote on that day, which was their right. I mean, for all the volunteer work, we ended up having about a million volunteers, and that was incredibly powerful nationwide, as if the country had come together as one. But achieving that meant a tremendous effort because people, rightly so, had a lot of mistrust and fear. It was a lot to overcome. So, what we experienced was incredibly powerful. You felt like you were part of history, like a person who had contributed, even if minimally, to writing the story. And seeing that peaceful return become a reality was truly powerful. Because I believe no nation wants civil war or expects death. No, people don't want that; they want to be able to resolve things as peacefully as possible.