

## Memories of a Medical Technologist Exiled in London.

Cristina Godoy-Navarrete.

To our Reinalda del Carmen Pereira



Reinalda del Carmen Pereira

When the opportunity arose to write something about my experience of Chile and my exile in the United Kingdom for the special issue of *Displaced Voices* my thoughts immediately turned to Reinalda del Carmen Pereira and how she has always been a presence throughout my career. And, without thinking, I made the connection between two women and their final destination at sea. Alfonsina Storni – Argentine poet – who out of love decided to walk into the sea to infinity. And Reinalda, who had a baby in her womb, who was thrown into the sea with a rail tied to her body so that she would sink to the infinite bottom, not for love but as punishment for her love of her people, for the poor, the oppressed, for a better world. Unlike other victims thrown into the sea by the brutal decision of Pinochet’s civil-military dictatorship, life relentlessly brought Reinalda back from the depths of the ocean, for she was found by a fisherman. She and all the victims of the Pinochet dictatorship live on in my memory, in defiance of oblivion and for continued resilience in the context of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coup d’état.

I started studying Medical Technology (MT) in 1970 and graduated in 1974, having specialized in haematology and blood banks. Since a young child, I had always known I wanted a career in health and, of the options open to me at that time, I had no hesitation in choosing MT as it offered a combination of basic sciences and their direct clinical application. It was also a relatively short course (only four years at the time), which meant I could start working in a relatively short space of time and be able to help my parents.

I belong to a generation that lived its university life during a period of great change in our society, change that was also reflected in university life. This meant that students were beginning to actively participate in many activities, not only political but also different cultural expressions such as theatre groups, music, sports, etc.

I was the first in my extended family to go to university and I undoubtedly form part of a privileged generation because we received a free education, taught by professors of a very high academic standard, who worked full-time and were totally committed to university teaching and research. It was thanks to the academic training that I received at the Medical Technology School of the University of Chile that, later, when I had to leave the country, I was able to continue my training through a postgraduate degree and later work as a professional in England, the country that welcomed us.



Cristina and her parents at graduation

Once I had graduated, I began practising as a medical technologist in the Blood Bank of the José Joaquín Aguirre Clinical Hospital of the University of Chile where I worked until the beginning of December 1974. I had done my Blood Bank internship in this same place and I was attracted by the diversity of the work that the MTs carried out here.

It was during my university studies that my commitment to the political project of building a more just and supportive society emerged. A commitment that was to be maintained after the military coup.

In December 1974, at my place of work, the José Joaquín Aguirre Hospital, I was called to the office of the hospital director, Dr. Arnello, and arrested by the DINA (secret police). After spending more than a year in several of the torture camps and detention centres of the military dictatorship that devastated our country, I was released without charge and subsequently left the country in January 1976 for England to join my husband. My departure from Chile, forced by circumstances, had a paradoxical effect on my professional development.



Newly arrived in England, and wondering what my life would be like in this new country, a mutual friend introduced me to Dr. Marcela Contreras, an eminent Chilean haematologist, whom I wanted to ask for advice about my professional future. While we were having a chat over a sandwich in a pub, she asked me why I had left the country, and where I had worked. I replied that I had worked at the Blood Bank of the JJ Aguirre Hospital, a place she knew very well because she had completed her doctoral thesis there under Professor Pablo Rubinstein.

Upon returning to the Transfusion Centre, she contacted me to tell me that she had spoken to the director of her centre as they were looking for a replacement for someone in the Tissue Typing lab (now known as Histocompatibility and Immunogenics). She advised me to apply

and, if I was offered the position, to take it. This was a gesture of immense solidarity and generosity towards someone she did not know. And this was how I started working as a medical technologist at the then North London Blood Transfusion Centre (NLBTC), now part of the National Health Service Blood and Transplant (NHSBT).

During the time I was working at the NLBTC, I also managed to revalidate my degree and, motivated by the work, I took the decision to continue on to postgraduate studies in order to develop professionally. I was able to do so thanks to a scholarship from the World University Service (WUS) awarded to Chilean refugees arriving in the country through a fund from the British government.

With the WUS scholarship, I first registered for an MSc in Immunology at the University of London and then, with funding from a research project, I started my PhD studies at the Department of Immunology at the London Hospital Medical College (LHMC), also part of the University of London.

I worked as a lecturer at the LHMC, a position I left in 1993, and went on to manage the Histocompatibility and Immunogenetics laboratory at the National Blood Service (NBS), now NHSBT, part of the National Health Service. I was subsequently appointed National Director of Histocompatibility Services in Immunogenetics at NHSBT and obtained an academic position as an Associate Professor in the Department of Immunology and Infectious Diseases at University College London (UCL), positions I held until my retirement in 2018.

All this seems, to the Chilean deniers, to be achievements gifted to us, obtained without effort on our part. Some even brazenly think we owe these successes to the civil-military dictatorship of Pinochet. And while I know there is nothing we can say to these deniers, ultra-right and right-wingers, the Pinochet plotters raising their voices again, what I can say is these accomplishments involved shedding 'blood, sweat and tears' far away from our loved ones, and in no way compensate for the brutality to which we were subjected in the dungeons of the dictatorship, far less for the losses of all the 'Reinaldas' (and Reinaldos), from whom the dictatorship stole their future. And so, any achievement, great or small, always carries with it the pain of their loss, even the guilt of having survived.

I dedicate this story to the memory of my colleague, Reinalda del Carmen Pereira, whom I was lucky enough to meet while doing my haematology practice at the Sótero del Río hospital in 1972/73. She was one of a group of young idealists who thought that a better and more just world was possible but whose dreams were brutally destroyed.