

TALKS WITH OMAR CABEZAS

*ADRIAN SOTO **

While remembering past events, he speaks with the habit of a lonely man, slowly expressing his thoughts aloud. He has the voice of a child which contrasts with the wrinkles under his eyes. He looks older than his 34 years.

Omar Cabezas is from Nicaragua. Like most of his country men he is a rather short fellow. Five years ago, on July 19, 1979, Omar Cabezas entered in Managua, the capital of that small Central American country leading a column of guerrilla fighters. The people of Managua welcomed him and his men with a carnival mood. Behind were the 50 years of Somozas' dynasty.

Cabezas joined the Sandinist movement in his home town León while studying law at the university. He admits that he did not join the rebels by purely ideological reasons but rather by sensitive issues.

"I remember from my childhood how the National Guard mistreated people in our quarter. One day, in 1968, on my way to the university I was stopped by the National Guard and beaten up. I was very afraid. A few hours earlier a bloody massacre had taken place in Managua, which I knew nothing about, because neither radio nor the papers said anything. That was a crucial moment. After a few weeks I joined the Sandinist Liberation Front", he recalls.

After the victory of the revolution, Omar Cabezas was awarded with the title of "Guerrilla Commander", a symbolic title for those guerrilla fighters who had distinguished themselves during the fight against Somozas' rule. Currently he is in charge of the military brigade of Managua and its surroundings.

In the Nicaraguan an international opinion this rebel-lawyer is given credit more for his literary skill than for his military achievements. His book "La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde" has been awarded in two international literary contests and 17 editions in Spanish have been published. The book has been translated into 8 languages. Currently it is being translated into Swedish and Norwegian.

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The book contains Cabezas' tales of his life as a guerrilla fighter. Julio Cortázar, the well known Argentine writer who died recently wrote that Cabezas' book "is a rare piece of literary efficiency". In fact, the book has a particular character in that the author express openly the emotions he experienced during the days of blood and fire. This creates a fascinating atmosphere which ends only with the last page of the book.

Still Cabezas is not used to the idea that people call him a writer. "The book came out almost by accident", he says. The idea of the book, he confesses, was not his own, but Pilar Arias's, a journalist who covered the Nicaraguan civil war for the USA and Mexican press. Now Cabezas remembers what happened some days after the Sandinist victory: "She called me and asked for a serie of interviews for an oral history about the revolution, which she was writing. I met her a few times, usually around midnights after my work, which by that time demanded 18 hours daily".

One day the journalist told him that she had information enough. Cabezas said that after three months he has almost forgotten the whole thing, when she phoned him up and asked for an appointment at his office. "When she walked in, she went straight to my desk and pulled out a pile of typed text", Cabezas remembers. "I came to tell you, commander, that you are a writer and that you have not realized it yet. Read this!" She told him handing over the results of their previous interviews.

Cabezas said that he could not take it seriously. Anyhow, the text of those interviews, which today are the first chapter of his book, were published in a Nicaraguan cultural magazine edited by Ernesto Cardenal and they had a strong impact on the cultural and political circles of the country.

"One day Ernesto himself", remembers Cabezas, "came and told me about the literary contest taking place in Havana. He suggested that I should put my notes in order and send them". "You are crazy! That is for intellectuals and well known writers", Cabezas answered his minister of culture.

Finally his friend forced Omar Cabezas to send his manuscript to the contest, and he won. In Nicaragua alone the book has already sold 50,000 copies. It is an absolute record for any book ever published in that country. In Spain the book received excellent reviews and is now in its fifth edition. In West Germany the book is in its third edition already.

Now Omar Cabezas complains that a similar pressure to the one experienced before completing this book is again asphyxiating him. "Everybody is demanding a second book from me", he said. "The problem is that we still are short of time. The military aggression against our country demands all our time. I feel it is very difficult to combine political and administrative work, with the work of a writer. But little by little a second book is progressing".

"La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde" is not a cry of a lonely rebel. It has very little of the romantic martyrdom which has been so popular in the previous Latin American revolutions. Doubtless, the main achievement of the book is that it describes the tales of guerrilla in a genuine way while the human aspect is at the center of every conflict.

When I asked his opinion as to why the human aspect in previous revolutionary experiences has not been treated the way that he does, he confessed that he has no scientific answer to the question. However he recognized that he has thought a great deal about the subject. "Probably, the Latin American revolutionaries have not realized how important it is to tell people about their own limitations and fears. A revolutionary is as mundane a being as anybody else. That is why I tell in my book

how I felt like a savage animal being alone in the mountains, or when I felt like masturbating. So I tell you, the main character of the book is not only me, the character represents many Nicaraguans, other Latin Americans, Africans, Asians and even Europeans. In a way it represents the human facing a set of unknown circumstances”.

This five years have been for Omar Cabezas, as well as for Nicaragua as a whole, a story time. The first months of joy were followed by the bitter reality of facing a permanent aggression across their borders. Many of the Sandinist economic, social and cultural programs have been cut short because of the war. Today as much as 25% of the National Budget is bound to military defence purposes.

Despite difficulties something important has been done in the editorial field. The “Nueva Nicaragua” editorial house, has in fact, published 200 titles since the Sandinist victory. It is quite a new record for the Central American standard. Most of the titles are Greeks and Roman classics, as well as international neoclassic literature. Reprinting of revolutionary classics in the field of economic thought and literature are also appearing.

My latest visit to Nicaragua took place last fall. I could not help by notice the growing presence of Soviet books in the bookstores, libraries and so on. So, I asked Omar Cabezas if that phenomenon implies a sovietization of the Nicaraguan culture. “Well, this is a problem of the revolution itself. Books mean foreign currency. The fact that there are so many books from the socialist countries is because they are offered to us as gifts. In order to avoid a dominant influence, and in order to establish a cultural balance, we have signed treaties with Mexico, Venezuela and Spain for special editions bound to Nicaragua” he answered.

Cabezas is convinced that Nicaraguas’s modest editorial efforts, together with the help provided from the Spanish speaking countries, and by that provided by the Socialist and Western European nations will provide the next generation of Nicaraguans with a world-wide cultural formation.

Nicaragua is a country with deep tradition of poetry. Such tradition dates from the turn of the century, from the time of Rubén Darío, one of the leading figures of the international ‘modernist school’. Rubén Darío, as Omar Cabezas was a son of León.

It is said that any Nicaraguan who knows how to write, should write poetry. Since the Sandinist victory, in different towns poetry marathons are organized every Sunday. Some last the whole day. However, Nicaragua has produced very little prose. Cabezas’ contribution is therefore even more important. “So, tell me Omar, what will happen with the Nicaraguan prose now?, I asked him at the conclusion of our interview”. “Look, the prose is very much linked to the social dynamic which our country is experiencing. In Nicaragua the Word, the Verb have been freed. People are using it indiscriminately like a child with a fascinating new toy. And this is because the Word, the Verb, was repressed and hence lived underground. But the Verb is not a Material thing which might wear out. As people use it, the Verb develops, and that is why the prose has a promising future in our country”.