

'At the Root of My Survival'

The Ex-Worker Podcast, Luciano Pitronello

2017

[ed. – The comrade Tortuga interviewed here was badly injured going into action. His right hand and three fingers of the left were amputated as a result, dozens of skin grafts were done, and (at least to begin with) his sight seriously damaged. While he was in intensive care on the verge of death, and the mother of his daughter raided and put in the media, Tortuga's own family denounced his ideas and way of life, freely telling police of his social circles. In letters that he composed while imprisoned, Tortuga brought up the consequences of struggle in the era of a global politics of 'anti-terrorism' – as well as more timelessly – in a way that bears reflecting on. "I will not deny that things were difficult, because there were days dark as the depths of the sea, when everything was crumbling around me, my life as I had constructed it went to shit. But this helped me, with the pain caused, to learn that all this I had built I had not made sufficiently solidly as to endure the praxis of my discourse. [If family, friends, comrades and lovers took off flying,] many thought that it would be better for me to just sink alone before I would take more people down with me, since they believe that I would never get back up from this, if all these people underestimated me because in their smallness they thought that they themselves wouldn't be able to stand such a fall as mine, today they are not at my side, it is only for their mediocrity, because know this: I do not lack the affection to forgive them, after everything, not one of us was prepared for this. [...] And it is that on this occasion I can contribute with some examples, through which I encourage other comrades to share their experiences, since the possibilities of struggle are infinite, madness, rape, exile, mutilation, victory, torture, clandestinity, laughter, imprisonment, pain, betrayal, amnesia, dependency, beatings, humiliation, death, all of these, none, others, and so many more, and how many of the warriors in the street today who fight against power and its designs know this? That is, how prepared are we to assume the costs of the social war if we do not know these kinds of things? Can we speak of not repenting without having all this in consideration? [T]o be recognized as an enemy of authority is not easy, less so when you are labeled as a terrorist in the media, your social environment is affected almost unanimously [...] few are the brave who dare to remain with you. Public opinion does its work and through all the possible methods the system tries to isolate you. They don't have to get their hands dirty with the death penalty anymore, these days the methods are more sophisticated and democratic [ed. – see Who Is It?]; they make your life cease to have meaning because they distance you from everything that you are a part of. And they don't just do this physically by getting you in a cage, but also psychologically to reduce your convictions. They demonize you collectively,

they erase the memory of what you once were and they transform you into a television case, in a failed explosive attack, in a bank robbery with a policeman killed, or into a member of a phantasmic terrorist organization. You are that, you are your letter of presentation, to such an extent that if you don't become aware that you are much more than what the press says. You end up believing it[...] your days no longer have the sense they did before, you are worth nothing and you have ruined the lives of everyone around you – why keep existing? Why cause more pain? They no longer need to stain their hands with your blood; please, we are civilized people, instead they incite you to finish yourself off[...] This is the hidden discourse that reproduces our shiny Chilean democracy; there are no longer any revolutionaries, now they minimize us as mere terrorists, because clearly a revolutionary is someone with feelings, with ideas, love of freedom and a companion of the oppressed: that is, someone worth imitating. Instead the terrorist is a shadow with impunity who has no heart and is obsessed with the use of violence due to past childhood traumas – so how to face this situation? [...] I took my time, I went as slow as a turtle, I exercised every day without a break, whether it was cold or hot, I was disciplined with myself, and it was a question of practice, patience and perseverance (the 3 “P”s like I told you)[and well.] here I am, look at me one year after the bombing that almost killed me. Who said that I would bite the mud of humiliation forever? Who said that I would be defeated for the rest of my life? Who said that the struggle does not make us great? If my ideas can bring me to lose my life, they can also bring me to recover it, that was always my gamble...” Tortuga is serving six years of 'supervised freedom'. On preparing for and surviving prison more generally, for those in the U.K. (especially those at risk of being gendered 'female' by State classification) we recommend 'Bang-Up & Smash' by ASBO, free online.

The Ex-Worker Podcast: Who are we speaking with today, and where are we?

Tortuga: With Luciano Pitronello, *el Tortuga*, and we're in the self-managed social center and autonomous library Sante Geronimo Caserio.

Ex-Worker: And how long has the space been around? Is it new?

Tortuga: Yes, it's new. it's been 3 or 4 months since we got here and started setting things up, and it's been just a month and a half that we've been able to open the doors to the public.

Ex-Worker: Have you heard that there's a book of your prison letters translated into English in the United States?

Tortuga: Yeah, I mean... I heard because you told me like a second ago, but it's still a surprise.

Ex-Worker: For those who haven't read the book, can you give us a brief summary of your case, and if you have an idea of what the book covers, what's in the book and in your letters?

Tortuga: Well, I transported a low-power bomb by hand to a branch of the Santander Bank in the early morning of June 1st, 2011 [*in Santiago, Chile*], around 2:30 in the morning, more or less. Due to the premature detonation of the device, I was injured in my hands, my eyes, and my skin, because a certain percent ended up burnt. Afterward I spent about three months in a hospital, and then two more months in intensive care, but at that point I was no longer imprisoned, I had been moved to my mother's house. From there I was charged under the anti-terrorist law and I ended up imprisoned in the hospital ward of Concesionada Prison, Santiago 1, because of the multiple injuries my body had sustained.

From this regimen, which was a pretty difficult place to be since it wasn't designed for somebody to be there permanently, but rather was a ward designed to receive prisoners or new arrestees as a kind of clinic, like for after somebody gets into a fight with another prisoner or after getting beat by the guards, after getting stabbed, or for people with illnesses that are easily treatable... so living there was, pretty... well, it wasn't very normal. So it was there that I had to get used to the idea of living in that situation.

The first few months of my incarceration passed, and after the visit of a loving comrade I got ready to write my first letter, and at the root of this was that my friend advised me that the silence surrounding my situation was not a good sign for the rest of our comrades. Basically from there I wrote the first letter, about 7 months after the failed attack, which is entitled 'Letter to the Indomitable Hearts', which was published the 5th of January, 2012 if I recall correctly.

After this would come a second letter, which would be a gesture of support and solidarity with Freddy Fuentevilla, Marcelo Villaruel [ed. – see *Rebels Behind Bars; Concerning the Juridical Situation of Our Comrade Marcelo Villaruel Sepulveda*], and Juan Aliste Vega, who at that time were in the middle of an international week of agitation and support for their case. And we should remember that just recently these three were convicted [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.3 pg52*] in the *Caso Security* and the death of the police corporal Luis Moyano and the injuries of another police officer. But before then they spent many many years in prison [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.1 pg72*], and ever since I came to realize that prison is a kind of passage for any combatant or comrade who takes “*the idea*” [of anarchism] seriously, they've been in my everyday thoughts.

So the way that I made myself present in trying to express solidarity with them, through the impossibility of being locked up in prison, and above all in the hospital ward, especially in the condition I was in, I told myself I would do *something* to show solidarity, which basically consisted of refusing to eat for 20 hours a day and consuming two small meals. One of my letters resulted from this time, which I suppose is in the book... but in reality I haven't seen the book so I don't know if all the letters actually do appear, but I hope they do!

Well, this was the February of 2012. Afterward there was a week of agitation in solidarity with me, which started on the 20th of March, which I believe is the day that my trial began, or the preparations for trial – I don't quite remember anymore¹. What I do remember is that the day I entered the prison was the 22nd of November, of 2011.

So the months went by, and I wrote a third letter, a third communiqué, which as I understand it is the most valuable in terms of wanting to pass on a little of the experience of being in prison, that in reality wasn't much time, and might not be the experience that all comrades have in prison. So in this third effort I wrote a communiqué at one year on from the failed bombing that affected me, which is entitled 'The Abyss Does Not Stop Us'.

In there I basically offer three reflections. The first is about prison. The second is about what it means morally, socially, even emotionally, to be charged as a terrorist, or as an enemy of the state, which is what happened to me. And the third is more specifically about my case, and deals with the subject of mutilation, to have one's body reduced physically; this is the theme. I try to cover each of these three themes from two perspectives: the first being a general manner, how to

¹ ed. – Court began July 20th, with rallies in Concepción, Valparaíso and Santiago and a bomb-threat clearing part of the complex. From the beginning of the case, plate-glass of Santander Bank fell to explosives or blows in Tultitlan and (twice in the same night) in Bristol, while incendiary messages of solidarity arrived from Russia, Indonesia and beyond on the back of similar deeds.

understand the problem in general terms, and the second being from my own subjectivity, how I see things, how I felt in certain moments... how I confronted things, basically.

In this third letter I also responded to the proposal [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.2 pg44*] from the comrades in Greece of the International Revolutionary Front and the Informal Anarchist Federation. I conclude that at the root of my survival was the solidarity that the comrades showed me. Because in every one of these three processes – being locked up in prison, being charged as a terrorist or enemy of the state, and becoming disabled – in every one of these processes I was gripped by this weapon that we have as anarchists, which is solidarity.

Ex-Worker: Were there any other prisoners who inspired you to carry on during your time in prison, either through their words or writings or deeds?

Tortuga: Yes, definitely. When I was locked up I discovered the story of Marcela Rodriguez, who was a militant for the MAPU Lautaro [ed. – see *Rebels Behind Bars; Concerning the Juridical Situation of Our Comrade Marcelo Villaroel Sepulveda*], who received the impact of a bullet on her spine during one of the Lautaro's operations. On the 14th of November, 1990 they were trying to rescue a political prisoner, Marco Ariel Antonioletti, from a hospital. In this operation the Lautaro killed 4 prison guards by a small bomb, and a cop went down too. The cop wasn't really in the plans, let's say, and it was he who fired the shot that left our *compañera* [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.2 pg34*] paraplegic. After she received the impact of the bullet, the group rescued Antonioletti and carried the two of them off to a truck. Just a few minutes later, the radio announces that there was a woman with Marcela's features involved in the escape, but with the damage to her spine they had to take her back to the very same hospital they had rescued Antonioletti from. She went to prison, of course, after being operated on and put in a wheelchair, and continued fighting.

Her story is really comforting because she spent 12 years in the San Miguel Prison, in the hospital section. When I found out this story, which I found out through a book called 'Rebellion, Subversion, & Political Imprisonment', written by Pedro Rosas, who also ended up prisoner in the High Security Prison (CAS) for MIR [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.1 pg73*] guerrilla activity. And it's a heavy story, because for political prisoners in Chile to be able to achieve privileges like leaving the prison for certain amounts of time, visiting other parts of the prison, and other benefits, they have to undergo a lot of mobilization: hunger strikes, rebellions... Here in Chile between 2000 and 2004 there was strong agitation by and for political prisoners. So Marcela Rodriguez, who was like the symbol of what nobody in society should ever be like – because she was a woman, an armed woman who robbed banks, who would carry a machine gun where she went (that's what they called her actually, the "Machine Gun Woman") – she was photographed in MAPU Lautaro operations, basically they wanted her head, they wanted her as a trophy. So the pressure on the government to allow this terrorist to leave prison, to be on the street, put them in an uncomfortable position. Eventually, what they offer her is extradition. Now, what is extradition? Basically, it's forced exile. Marcela Rodriguez is free in any part of the world except Chile. The powerful part of the story is Marcela ends up accepting asylum (which isn't truly asylum) in Italy, with her wheelchair and all. A woman who can't even move around just by herself winds up being more dangerous than all these other folks. It's crazy, this story!

And when she leaves prison the reporters go crazy because she was always this press magnet. They try to record her in the airport, and the last image of her in Chile is of Marcela in her wheelchair, crossing the border immigration guards to board the plane, raising her fist and shouting "*la lucha continua*" – the struggle continues.

When I found out this story, I said *“I can’t give up, man. If she could do it like that, I can’t give up here.”* That’s also how the story of Savvas Xiros is, from the 17th of November organization in Greece. In 2002, he was injured by a failed bomb and ended up in circumstances similar to my own. But lamentably, he is going to spend many years in prison, because he is part of a terrorist organization... well in reality it’s not terrorist but revolutionary, and they’ve been operating for 29 years. So the luck that Savvas Xiros had, the luck of Marcela Rodriguez is truly cruel because at the heart of it they both have disability and prison as their destiny, yet even with this heavy baggage they are capable of continuing to struggle.

So I look at myself and I see that I can still go on, and so I can’t give up, man! So for me, these *compañeros* are a compass, they’re my north; they’ve shown the way because they’ve raised the bar to where I have to meet it. It might be a strange way to look at it, but that’s really how I see it. Like that. [*Tortuga went on to describe a prisoner support project that he’s involved in, and his perspectives of the significance of prisoners and solidarity among anarchists and antagonists in Chile.*]

Tortuga: Projects of support for comrades in prison... there’s the project I was telling you about – the solidarity raffle, which is organized by a group of folks and what we do is give away prizes in the form of a raffle in order to collect some funds, even though it may not be a ton, for our comrades in prison. This is an event that happens every month. Every month we look for an event where we can hold the raffle, and we assemble a schedule of events on our webpage, can I give it to you?

Ex-Worker: Yes, please!

Tortuga: It’s rifasolidaria.wordpress.com. Basically the idea is generate a steady stream of funds which, like I said, isn’t a ton but it’s at least a small effort to show our comrades that they’re not alone. I’ve also seen on the internet some communiqués from an anti-prison collective “Vuelo de Justicia” (“Flight of Justice”, named after an incredible prison break in 1996, look it up!) And as I understand it, although I don’t know a ton, this collective has been pretty active looking after lots of the comrades in prison. There’s also a website for a periodical that also gets printed, which is called ‘Publicacion Refractario’. It’s well known, and also has a pretty internationalist character; it’s very good. They’re always publishing updates about the comrades in prison, developments in their case, legal work that the comrades have to face, and material for supporting a comrade if they should get imprisoned.

Ex-Worker: In the anarchist movement, here in Chile and more broadly, what role does prisoner support play?

Tortuga: According to my way of thinking about this topic, here in Chile there is no movement. There are basically individuals that struggle, each in their own rhythm and pulse, in their own particular and unique ways, but there isn’t a... I don’t know how to say it... there isn’t a movement, so to speak. There’s convergence, gathering points, but beyond this... it’s difficult to say. Because unfortunately, and I don’t like to say it, there’s a lot of people just here for fashion. They’re around because politics is a means to other things: to find friends, to find romantic partners, to feel a sense of belonging, to feel like you’re part of something. So sometimes you can find comrades who are super excited, very involved, but at the end of the day it only lasts for a year, a year and a half. Repression comes down and they run. I believe that to call something a movement it has to be something that moves you; it’s something that can maintain itself against repression, and when there’s not repression, onward!

So I don't believe there is a movement here. What no one can deny is that there are communities in struggle, which is different to me. This social center for me is a community of struggle. The Sacco and Vanzetti [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.1 pg86*] library is, for me, a community of struggle. For me, the squat Isla Tortuga is a community of struggle. Regardless of the forms of how each community or group involves themselves – their form, their rhythm, their pulse – we have different ways of going about things, but you can't deny that these people, these spaces are fighting back. This is something you can't lie about..

Coming back to your question – support for prisoners, the way I see it, has deteriorated. It has deteriorated because the anarchists here in Chile, or the anti authoritarians, the nihilists, the revolutionaries, however you want to call them, are encountering prison as something pretty new in our lives. In general the anarchist “movement” in Chile is very new². I mean, *Caso Bombas* [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.1 pg73*] demonstrated this. When police raided a few squats, everybody ran for cover, everyone hid their face. This shows you how unstable the movement was, evidenced by how unprepared we were to live through prison, and even less prepared to confront it. Through this you can see that in a lot of cases that you might say “good, they're getting support” or “they're getting attention” but obviously something is missing. Something is missing like... Why are we appealing to show that cases were frame ups? Why do our comrades stay silent? Or like, why don't we ever stand up to the judges? And I include myself, I criticize the way I've gone about things too. Why do we appeal to innocence? Why do we accept the way we're treated?

There's a ton of things that we might not always be capable of confronting. So for example I see, well I don't want to idealize anything, but I think it's worth understanding that Greece is a little more advanced, at least in terms of history, and in Greece it's a different conversation. The comrades there confront these issues in a different manner. So if you're over there and looking at the situation here... well here, if in Greece they're walking upright, we're crawling on all fours. Of course throughout the world there are other places where there aren't even comrades, where there isn't anything going on. But it's important to keep in mind how recent all of this is here, to understand how much further we have to go. But I'm not satisfied with crawling, I want to gallop, I want to run, I want to fly. And for this, you have to work.

Ex-Worker: Three questions in one: after your time in prison how has your orientation to anarchist strategy changed? And I don't mean which acts or tactics are more important, but I'm speaking about the anarchist project in general. How has your orientation changed and what tasks do you think are most important? OK, that's one; secondly, what would you say to someone considering risking their freedom to do something, like taking direct action? And what would

² ed. – “Perhaps one of the most disastrous consequences [of the dictatorship] was the production of a generation lacking in almost all senses: emotionally lacking, lacking a sense of belonging, lacking existential paradigms, and thus lacking passion, lacking will... castrated in the broadest sense of the word. Our parents were the children beaten, raped, tortured, and murdered by the imposition of first world shock necessary for the violent mutation from the “Chilean way to socialism” [ed. – the plan to put Chile on a 'non-capitalist' road to 'development'; a contradiction in terms...] to the kingdom of commodities[...] And our inheritance, our American dream that we lived – and we did live it – we carry it in our bodies: the insecurity, the terror, the impossibility of recognizing ourselves as a community or continuity from the past, not to mention as a community in antagonistic struggle[...] Along with our guts, they cut us off from our history and here we are, improvising, relearning, reinventing ourselves [ed. – see *'The Matter of Knowing Who We Are'*]. [...] This construction of an ideology, worldview, spirituality, or whatever it may be called, within the anti-authoritarian spectrum is recent and, like everything new, is complex and is constructed basically from experience, ergo beginning from trial and error” (Anarchic Practices in the Territory Dominated by the Chilean State).

you say to someone who would never consider that, who just want to live a life of safety and comfort, but who are still anarchists?

Tortuga: Well, this reply may disappoint you a little, but my outlook hasn't actually drastically changed. I still hold the same beliefs that I did on the first of June in 2011, you know? For me, there isn't some big difference between a comrade who carries a bomb in their backpack or one who carries a book. For me, both tools, when aimed directly at the bowels of power, can achieve the same task. It's all the same for me if a comrade carries a submachine gun or carries a microphone. To me what is central is *where the attack is directed towards*. The tool you utilize is a question of comfort and familiarity, it's a question of whether you feel satisfied with what you're doing: to feel pleasure basically, to feel good and that what you're doing is the right thing. If you feel like the thing to do is publish a newspaper – great! Then I'm happy for you. If what you think is needed nowadays is to attack capital in some direct manner – all right then, do it! But for me, what upsets me is knowing that something needs to be done and not doing it. In there I see a contradiction in my way of understanding the struggle.

So my way of responding to your question wouldn't be to say that we'll have a better revolution by having more of one thing, or that one thing is better than another... I don't know, the library, doing workshops, direct attacks, expropriations: to me these all have the same worth, there isn't one that's more valuable than another. If you can defend what you're doing with enough passion, then it's alright with me.

And what would I say to the comrades who want to carry out direct action, or who are carrying out direct action? Well... I know that if somebody is listening to this they're just listening, they can't make a case out of my words alone, but whatever. I would say to *be careful, take care*. For me its like they say, you've got to face reality, but you've got to take care. You have to give yourself time to plan well.

For the anarchists, or the nihilists or the revolutionaries, what we have plenty of is heart. But war isn't won with heart alone. We need to use a little more prudence – so the action won't be today, it will be tomorrow but it will also be better. It will be better planned, more focused on the safety of those involved, and other small details that I don't know if I can pass on here. But like I've written, one mistake, one small neglect can change everything. And we are far too valuable to be needlessly putting ourselves at risk. I think my most focused advice today would be, more than anything, that this comrade value herself [*sic*], that she not feel like her life is just a material contribution to the struggle. I would tell this comrade to value herself a little more, that she give herself time and room to breathe. That's all, that the struggle is for your whole life, it won't change by waiting one more night.

To the comrades who would never think of focusing their struggle on direct action, I would respond with basically the first points I made about fighting in an illegal manner – because I'm using the vocabulary of power, which is a contradiction, but, well, what can we do? Life is a contradiction itself! Well, OK, it doesn't matter if somebody doesn't want to confront power with a gun or a bomb. Getting involved in a newspaper or something, that's fine, but I think the important thing to understand is that prison, death, clandestinity, having to go to battle are things that don't only face the comrades who pick up a weapon. In the dictatorship here, unfortunately it was a struggle of fire and blood. To have had a newspaper, a printing press, just copying a flyer would mean torture, possibly even death. So in this sense, if you're not going to use a gun, that's fine by me. What's most important to me is that you can defend your project and your idea.

Ex-Worker: Anything more for our listeners, the *gringos* of the north, or the rest of the English-speaking world?

Tortuga: Keep it up, Seattle May Day!!!

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