

REVIEWS

‘A Great Feeling of Love’: Hilda and Che

By Hobart Spalding

MY LIFE WITH CHE: THE MAKING OF A REVOLUTIONARY by Hilda Gadea (Foreword by Ricardo Gadea), Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 233 pp., \$21.95 (hardcover)

THE CUBAN REVOLUTION HAS PROBABLY been given more attention in the U.S. mass media than any other revolution to date. This is due to its longevity, its proximity to the world center of empire, the United States, and not least to its many achievements. It also reflects the colorful, dynamic personalities who have led the revolution, the remarkable spirit and élan of the Cuban people, and, one must say it too, the violent opposition of its detractors, who waste no opportunity to attack the whole process. The revolution's 50th anniversary and recent changes in Cuba have engendered an unusual crop of materials about the island and its leaders. Works like Ignacio Ramonet and Fidel Castro's collaboration, *My Life: A Spoken Autobiography* (Scribner, 2008), and Steven Soderbergh's recent epic *Che* are but two examples.

Hilda Gadea's *My Life With Che*, while actually a reprint of a 1978 release, falls within these parameters. It offers, however, a slightly different perspective. Most works on the Cuban Revolution concentrate on larger political issues, breakthrough moments, and endless political debates, but this book strikes a more personal, day-to-day note without ever neglecting the political. It reminds us of the ties between the political and the per-

sonal, which are often overlooked in writings about famous personages.

Gadea, who became Che Guevara's wife, narrates in the first person. A Peruvian activist and economist, she chose exile in Guatemala after the coup in her native country led by General Manuel Odria in 1948. Guatemala was then the scene of a progressive revolution headed first by Juan José Arevalo (1945) and after 1951 by Jacobo Arbenz. It had become home to many exiles fleeing repressive regimes, and Hilda became a fixture among that group. In this context Che walked into her life, and the narrative about this fascinating relationship begins. It becomes at once a tale of courtship and of two people struggling to make the world a better place.

As in any good story, several subplots run through the text. At the personal level the book details how their friendship and socializing grew into something more over time. Hilda broke off the relationship several times but always succumbed to Che's subsequent advances and apologies. They married in September 1955 and had a daughter, Hildita, in February.

A lot of space is given to Che's doting fatherhood (although he wanted a boy), and several letters to his daughter from faraway places are included in the text. He continued to visit frequently after the couple divorced in 1959. The narrative also includes descriptions of parties, food, and music, as well as accounts of trips the couple took to ancient Mayan ruins around the country.

The photos included in the book help bring all this to life.

Life among the exile community, mostly in Guatemala but also Mexico, constitutes another theme. The reader is struck by the deep level of solidarity that the exiles felt and their willingness not only to protect each other but to share when often they had very little themselves. Clothes, a room, a job—all became currency within the community.

Almost as in a Dostoyevsky novel, the local, national, and international police (including the FBI and CIA) are never far away in this memoir, forcing sudden departures, missed connections, the jettisoning of incriminating papers and books, and semi-clandestine lives. Here one is struck by the number of times either or both Hilda and Che ended up in the hands of the authorities, only to walk free, sometimes because friends or diplomats intervened on their behalf, sometimes through bribery. In fact, at one point, U.S. authorities deported Che from Miami back to Argentina. If they had only known!

The couple read voraciously together, and heated discussions ensued. Their choices included 19th-century Russian novelists as well as Marxist standards like *Capital* or *What Is to Be Done?* Hilda also introduced Che to the Chinese Revolution through Mao's writings, and had events not intervened, the couple might have ended up going there to see it for themselves. Both, although with some reservations, expressed interest in the Soviet Revolution as

a model. The young Argentine liked Sartre, read John Reed, and even digested John Maynard Keynes. The couple also shared many 19th- and 20th-century Spanish classics. What emerges is a portrait of keen minds, eager to learn, ready to discuss, and always searching for more.

The two vigorously debated what they read, not only with each other but at the larger social gatherings that formed a regular part of their lives. From these discussions there emerges a picture of how Che's thinking evolved during these years. One central issue in these debates centered on the role of the United States as an imperialist power and the need to counteract that power. The couple often discussed roads to change. Che, more than Hilda, remained convinced that elections would never provide the answer and that armed revolution by a small group, fully supported by the people, presented the only clear path. They thus to one degree or another rejected the left-leaning social democratic parties of the time (APRA in Peru, the MNR in Bolivia, AD in Venezuela) as insufficiently anti-imperialist. While both recognized the importance of working inside their own countries (Hilda more than Che), they thought that aiding a truly revolutionary movement in one Latin American country represented the first advance toward continental liberation.

The U.S.-backed invasion of Guatemala in 1954 proved a milestone. The couple sat in Guatemala City while the Arbenz government crumbled, while refusing to arm the people or even take to the hills or jungles in resistance. Che roundly criticized this as a grave mistake, stoutly defending the necessity for any government to rely firmly on the people.

Hilda had introduced Che to Cuban exiles in Guatemala soon after

they met. From them he got to know those in Mexico. Of course, he met both Fidel and Raúl. They come across as fascinating young revolutionaries. Although the pages on Che's relationship with the Castro brothers are few, it becomes obvious why Fidel commanded the respect, devotion, and undying loyalty of those around him. In the tide of events, and after some soul searching, Che signed up to go on the fateful expedition to Cuba in fall 1956. Here some anecdotal material may be of interest. Fidel originally tried to get two or three boats for the invasion. He only secured one: the *Granma*. Since only so many of the group could go they had to decide who would stay. In part the decision rested on an individual's body weight, since the boat could carry only so many pounds.

The final chapters tell the story of Hilda and Hildita waiting for news from Cuba. She returned to Peru in the meantime but did visit Che's parents in Argentina. The couple corresponded as best they could given the circumstances. Mother and daughter left for Cuba in January 1959 to join Che. He told Hilda that he had met another woman, and the couple agreed to divorce which they did later that year. Hilda held several jobs in Cuba, including one at Prensa Latina, the Cuban state news agency. The 1968 "progressive" military coup in Peru offered her an opportunity to return to her country, which she did, and she spent the rest of her life working actively with left forces there. In 1972 she was in an automobile accident while visiting Cuba, and during her treatment the doctors found a cancer that proved fatal two years later. She was buried in the Pantheon of the Revolutionary Armed Forces in Havana next to Hildita, who had passed away prematurely,

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and alongside Che's father, who also rests there.

This book is more than the story of a woman who became Che's compañera or of Che's evolution during a key period. Hilda played a very important role in his formation as a revolutionary, a vocation he once famously said is "guided by a great feeling of love." Clearly the two shared a life together, albeit for a short time, a life that bordered on the ideal for a couple deeply engrossed in the movement. While revolutions are led by people like Che who stand out, they are founded in people like Hilda Gadea—tireless workers, faithful compañeros and compañeras, and steadfast supporters of truth and justice.

Hobart Spalding is a member of the NACLA Editorial Committee.

