

Zapata's Sacrifice and a Mother's Pain

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The death of Orlando Zapata Tamayo and infinite pain felt by his mother has shaken the entire world. In its thoughtlessness and intolerance, the Cuban regime did not take into account the repudiation the death of a black man condemned for defending the justice of his democratic ideals would elicit from all over the civilized world.

Few times has the fight for democracy in Cuba brought together so many condemnatory voices. One must respect those who courageously sacrifice their own lives. It takes incredible courage to sacrifice one's own life; to reject it in defense of a just cause inspires deep admiration.

Orlando Zapata Tamayo came to personify 50 years of pent up frustration, racial discrimination and a lack of resources. He became a bricklayer; that was as far as he was able to go in a country where official propaganda boasts about the opportunities it offers to its people if they accept the government's decisions. He was born into a poor and humble family; he was also born black. He suffered the worst kind of all discrimination of all, one that does not allow dissent or disagreement from those with dark skin. Because a somewhat shaky Revolution has 'eliminated' racial discrimination, according to the governing class, blacks in Cuba are not allowed to oppose it.

Yet, at this time, after half a century, the dam has finally burst and released a torrent of dramatic events. Zapata Tamayo's mother, Reina Luisa, whose pain is immeasurable, has

taken into her heart her son's love of truth and democracy, beliefs in which he never once faltered, even in his moments of greatest desperation. She cried out "Zapata lives!" Through that gesture, her son's existence fully transcended beyond a mother's pain; with this she projected her son and his ultimate sacrifice into the future, thus guaranteeing, at a level almost beyond human comprehension, that he gave his life for the best of all causes.

I felt deeply moved as I squeezed Reina Luisa's hand. I was able to feel her controlled pain. Yet even if this pain did not silence her protests, it did forever tinge her gaze with terrible sadness. The slow death that Orlando Zapata Tamayo chose for himself to prove his courage and just how much he rejected the sentence that was imposed on him and 75 more of his brothers from the 'Cause of the 75' group, was an enormous sacrifice. They say it is better to give than to receive; in Orlando Zapata Tamayo's case, he gave his most precious asset—his life.

We cannot stop speaking and writing about Orlando Zapata Tamayo. I received from opposition leader Marta Beatriz Roque Cabello, of the *Mesa de Trabajo*, the terrifying and emotional testimony of Normado Hernández González, who is currently confined at the *Hospital Nacional de Reclusos* [National Prisoners' Hospital], at the Combinado del Este prison in Havana. This young, independent, journalist from Camagüey, Cuba, who was among those con-

victed during the *Primavera Negra* [Black Spring] (2003) along with Zapata Tamayo, and even Marta Beatriz, expressed with admiration how moved he had been by his brother's selfless sacrifice on behalf of the cause.

In "Los últimos días de Zapata" [Zapata's Last Days], Hernández González speaks dramatically, and in detail, about Zapata's final hours. He also expresses the intense pain he felt as a result of losing his fellow brother. In closing, I believe that Hernández González's words capture what I would like to be able to say: "The dawn is cold. The stars are trembling with emotion out there, in infinity. God is receiving into His paradise a man whose life was blessed with heroic courage, the resistance

of martyrs, and the spirit of the Gods. He is embracing a man who died because he loved the country in which he was born, because he loved his neighbors as he did himself. He is welcoming a 42-year-old, humble, black Cuban worker. He is welcoming Orlando Zapata Tamayo who in his 86-day hunger strike gave us a universal lesson about integrity, patriotism, principles, and conviction."

Translated by Brianna Albert, Danielle Rosenfeld, Damián Valdés and Isabelle Richardson, in 82-443 *Spanish Reading & Translation Workshop*, a course with Dr. Kenya C. Dworkin y Méndez, at Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh, PA.



Reina Luisa Tamayo showing her son, Orlando Zapata Tamayo's bloodied T-shirt