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## Monika, the woman who did justice for Che Guevara

She was struck by the reasons that the streets of the neighborhood were deserted. And let a thick silence float. Suddenly, all of a sudden, hell broke loose.



On October 9, 1967, Che Guevara was assassinated in the Quebrada del Yuro, Bolivia. Three and a half years later, ten thousand kilometers away, Colonel Roberto Quintanilla – one of those responsible for the death of the mythical guerrilla and then Bolivian consul in Hamburg, Germany – fell under the bullets of an avenger, Mónica Ertl.

▼Mónika Ertl (1937-1973) the woman who did justice for Che



Guevara

During the noon of April 1, 1971, the Bolivian consul in the German city of Hamburg was in his office, located on the first floor of an old downtown building. With a finger stuck in the intercom, I heard the voice of the receptionist:

*"The Australian lady who comes for her visa arrived.*

*"Pass it on.*

Then he smoothed his black mustache as he stood up. After entering, the woman slowly closed the door. Her blonde hair sported a laborious hairstyle and sunglasses masked her face. The consul greeted her with a smile that tried hard to be kind, as she extended her left hand to a chair. And he said, *"Take a seat, Miss.*

She did not obey. I was like paralyzed. The scene itself was paralyzed.



Colonel Roberto Quintanilla.

The consul, somewhat uncomfortable, repeated the phrase with a more energetic tone. And he stuck his eyes on the newcomer, no longer striving to be pleasant. Suddenly, he raised his eyebrows, as if surprised. At that instant the unmistakable sound of a gunshot was heard.

The woman, with a .38 caliber Colt Cobra in her hands, fired two more shots. Only then did the consul collapse on the carpet.

Then there was a heavy silence. The perpetrator quickly put her feet in dust.

In the office was his wig, black glasses and, on the body of the consul, a paper that simply read: "Victoria o muerte / ELN".

They were the acronym of the National Liberation Army. This is the name of the guerrilla militia commanded by Ernesto "Che" Guevara in Bolivia. And the man executed was not, by the way, a common diplomat but Colonel Roberto Quintanilla, one of those responsible for his murder, after being captured in the Quebrada del Yuro on October 9, 1967. De so that the execution of the soldier was the work of a political revenge. But it is also the hinge of another plot that deserves to be told.

At this point, it is necessary to go back in time.

Heaven by storm



A photo that entered history: the body of "Che" with those who ended his life

It was the spring of 1953 when the German mountaineer and cameraman, Hans Ertl, 45, arrived in Bolivia to settle with his family in a jungle hacienda located east of Santa Cruz. In Germany, that man had been a friend, lover and collaborator of Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler's favorite filmmaker, whose films were a milestone of Nazi propaganda. Ertl used to boast of his intervention in at least two: *Triumph des Willens* (The Triumph of the Will/1935) and *Olympia* (1936), a documentary about the Berlin Olympics.

Then, after the war broke out, he became the photographer of Marshal Erwin Rommel during his campaign in North Africa. The guy also used to give himself a dam of his friendship with him. And since the "Desert Fox" – as Rommel was called – was shot by order of the Fuehrer for his link with the officers who attempted against his life on July 20, 1944, such a circumstance, after the fall of the Third Reich, allowed Ertl to repeat a kind of ideological disclaimer over time: "I was never a Nazi." For now, in Bolivia, no one bothered him about it.

The days followed for him peacefully divided between his rural property, baptized "La Dolorida", his tasks as a documentary filmmaker and his extensive stays in the city of La Paz. There he frequented the German community. In that context he befriended a compatriot, who even got a job in a sawmill in Las Yungas exploited by three Austrian Jews who had arrived in that country fleeing the Holocaust.

The new friend became a regular visitor to Ertl's home in La Paz, to the point that his daughters called him "Uncle Klaus". Such was his first name. His surname: Altmann. Ertl's family – made up of his wife, Aurelia, and teenagers Monika, Heidi and Beatrix – accompanied him in one place and another. Of the daughters, her favorite was 16-year-old Monika. She assisted him in film assignments, as well as sharing his passion for skiing and mountaineering.

Aurelia died in 1958.

Monika, then, fixed her permanent residence in La Paz, under the protection of the Harjes, a wealthy German-Bolivian family whose children she was friends with, especially the eldest, named Hans. It didn't take long for them to fall in love. And the wedding was at Christmas that year.

For a time the couple resided in northern Chile, as Hans was an engineer in the copper mines. Back in La Paz, the couple turned to an intense social life: golf games, bridge and that kind of thing. But their intimacy was not idyllic. Because Hans was actually a

controlling coelopath. Still, the crisis between them took time to erupt: they only divorced in 1966.



El lugar donde se encontraron los restos de Guevara.

Faltaban meses para que Bolivia concitara la atención internacional por la muerte del Ché Guevara. En ese momento, Monika asimiló esa noticia con cierta indiferencia. En eso tuvo que ver su despolitización. Y el hecho de estar muy imbuida en los preparativos de un viaje a Europa.

Al año siguiente, estando en Alemania, se encontró de casualidad con Reinhardt, el menor de los Harjes. Y regresaron juntos a Bolivia. Su ex cuñado, un estudiante de Medicina con ideas de izquierda, supo introducirla en los círculos revolucionarios de La Paz. Monika, entonces, tomó contacto con sobrevivientes del foco guevarista, agrupados en lo que quedaba del ELN. Y se unió a ellos. Sus nuevos compañeros la llamaban “Imilla”.

En esa época inició un apasionado romance con el antiguo lugarteniente del Che y líder de esa organización: Guido Peredo Leigue (a) “Inti”. Como era de suponer, la militancia de Mónica no fue vista con buenos ojos por su familia.

Por aquellos días, Hans continuaba administrando su campo, sin dejar de lado la realización de documentales. También frecuentaba con asiduidad a sus amistades alemanas en La Paz. Entre ellos seguía estando Altmann, cuya vida había dado un promisorio salto: ya alejado del aserradero de Las Yungas, por entonces hacía negocios en sociedad con el presidente militar de Bolivia, René Barrientos.

En marzo 1969, Monika visitó a su padre en La Dolorida. Ella tenía un propósito preciso: instalar allí una base de entrenamiento del ELN. Pero Hans se negó con vehemencia en medio de una tensa discusión. Fue la última vez que se vieron. El 9 de septiembre, Inti Peredo cayó acribillado en La Paz durante una emboscada del ejército. El coronel Quintanilla encabezaba el operativo.

El callejón sin salida



El genocida Klaus Barbie. Extraditado a Alemania, fue condenado a prisión perpetua. En la mañana del jueves 1º de abril de 1971, las calles de la zona céntrica de Hamburgo estaban atestadas de peatones. Quizás algunos hayan reparado en la silueta femenina que salía del antiguo edificio ubicado en el número 125 de la Heilwigstraße. Pero sin suponer que aquella mujer acababa de cargarse a un represor boliviano. Ella no era otra que Monika, y se perdió entre el gentío sin dejar rastros. Ese acto extremo causó el interés de la prensa mundial, que ilustró sus coberturas al respecto con imágenes del finado: aquel hombre con uniforme de gala en un acto castrense; aquel hombre con uniforme de combate en una zona selvática, y aquel hombre junto al cuerpo sin vida del Che, señalando una de sus heridas con el dedo índice. Al día siguiente, en La Dolorida, Hans Ertl escrutaba aquellas mismas fotografías en la tapa del diario santacruceño El Deber. Durante la mañana se había enterado del asunto por radio. Y lo asaltó un presentimiento: ¿acaso la ejecutora de habría sido nada menos que su hija?

Ya al anochecer, confirmó esa sospecha con la llegada a la hacienda de cuatro policías. Pero se retiraron sin dar con él. Hans estaba oculto en la copa de un árbol con una

carabina, dispuesto a todo. Lo cierto es que Interpol había identificado a Monika como la ejecutora del coronel Quintanilla. Y ella era ya buscada en medio mundo.

Para Ertl empezó una etapa de de insomnio y desesperación. No intuía en el destino de Monika nada bueno. Ella parecía tragada por la tierra. En rigor, se había refugiado por unos meses en Chile –allí gobierna Salvador Allende– y luego viajó a Cuba, dado que el ELN no consideraba prudente su regreso a Bolivia. Allí ya estaba instaurada la dictadura del general Hugo Banzer.

En enero de 1972 la sorprendió en La Habana una noticia publicada en el diario Granma: la identificación en Bolivia por dos cazadores franceses de nazis, Serge y Beate Klarsfeld, del criminal de guerra alemán Klaus Barbie, apodado el “Carnicero de Lyon” debido a sus tareas como jefe de la Gestapo en dicha ciudad francesa. Entre sus “hazañas” resalta la captura y deportación de 44 niños judíos ocultos en la villa de Izieu, y el asesinato de Jean Moulin, el cuadro de la Resistencia francesa de más alto rango atrapado por los nazis. En el plano cuantitativo, se le atribuía el envío a los campos de concentración de 7.500 personas y 4.432 asesinatos.



Una foto que entró en la historia: el cuerpo del «Che» junto a quienes terminaron con su vida

Barbie was none other than "Uncle Klaus". But he emerged unscathed from the problem, thanks to the protection of the Banzer regime, which he was already advising on the organization and functioning of his repressive apparatus. discussed the matter with Regis Debray, who was also in

Havana. He was the French intellectual who had been in contact with Ché in Bolivia. Captured for that reason, he was released in the late 1970s, during the government of General Juan José Torres. At that moment a plan to kidnap Barbie arose. Weeks later, such an operation was organized from the Chilean north with the permission of the ELN.

Along with Monika and Debray, the Klarsfeld couple and the Bolivian journalist Gustavo Sánchez Salazar participate. The first step was to smuggle into Bolivia from the Atacama Desert. But, finally, a road accident ruined the action. In the middle of that year, an emergency meeting convened by the Bolivian Minister of the Interior, General Juan Pereda Asbún, was held at the headquarters of the fearsome Directorate of State Intelligence (DIE).

The reason: the possible presence of Monika in the country. Among the attendees was Barbie.

They weren't

wrong. She lived clandestinely in a popular neighborhood in the municipality of El Alto. And with his comrades he tried to reorganize the ELN, decimated by repression. Their capture was a primary objective of the regime.

In such circumstances, she managed to send a letter to Hans and was able to receive his answer: he offered her refuge and protection in La Dolorida. No there will be another contact between

them. On the morning of May 12, 1973, Monika left her shelter to meet with two militants.

She was struck by the reasons that the streets of the neighborhood were deserted. And let a thick silence float. Suddenly, all of a sudden, hell broke loose.

From corners, from trees and from parked cars, countless silhouettes triggered in unison. She died pierced by the first shots. As the chime of the bullets ceased, Klaus Barbie came over to recognize the body.

Eight years later, after the dictatorship of General Luis García Meza, that subject was deported to



France. There he was tried for his crimes during World War II and sentenced to life in prison.

Barbie died in a Lyon prison on September 25, 1991, at the age of 78. Hans Ertl breathed his last breath in Santa Cruz de la Sierra on October 23, 2000. He was 92 years old.

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