

Laudatory Speech for Vilma Nunez de Escorcía

by Luise Scherf

Holding a laudatory speech, or a speech of praise for Vilma Nunez, seems to me almost like gilding the lily. Through her human rights work, Vilma has reached and impressed so many people, both at a national and at an international level, that one could imagine she is known everywhere. However, this is of course not the case, and I will therefore try to draw you a picture of what the name and the person Vilma Nunez means to many people.

I got to know Vilma more than 30 years ago in Managua. At that time, the era of the Sandinista government, she was the head of the governmental National Commission of Human Rights, and I was able to work in the department for human rights education, which was at the time in the process of being set up. In practical terms, it dealt with training courses for prison personnel to inform guards that prisoners also have rights and to clarify the nature of these rights.



The reason for this was the serious abuses that to a certain extent took place within the prisons - Vilma and her colleagues tried to take action against this situation. She was herself a fighter for the Sandinista and a member of the Sandinista Party, had as a young lawyer defended political prisoners in court against the Somoza dictatorship, was persecuted, locked up and tortured. These three words, spoken in such a way in just a matter of seconds, meant in real time years of fear and horror. When the revolution was successful in 1979 and the Sandinista took over the government, Vilma Nunez was one of those set free.

She did not renounce her independence but was indeed also critical of the injustice that had taken place during the Sandinista period of government according to national and international current law. Such independence demanded great courage even at that time when her own party formed the government. The Ministry of Internal Affairs regarded Vilma Nuñez in person and the Human Rights Commission which she headed as trouble makers and, as far as possible, denied them access to information.

This is the case in many countries: it reflects well on a government to establish an official human rights position in order to create the impression that everything possible is being done to ensure the validity of human rights. In practice, the respective government often tries to brush aside the reservations of the human rights commission, to suppress them or even to fight against them, accusing them of "fouling their own nest."

Vilma Nuñez was very clear about the discrepancies that too often existed between what the Sandinista government declared and what it actually did or allowed to happen. Even today she still reproaches herself for not having gone public with such problems at the time.

We often understand the term "human rights" to be solely connected with concept of **civil freedom rights** - for example, the right to free expression of opinion, the freedom of assembly or religious freedom. And yet, the fact that cultural, economic and social rights are an integral and indispensable part of human rights is an understanding that Vilma Nuñez has campaigned for her entire life and which she has made clear through her work.

While I was in Managua in the 90s during the rainy season giving music training sessions for primary teachers, I watched the news on television after a long, tiring working day. The particularly heavy rains fall had swept away the cardboard and tin sheet huts of one of the slums, leaving many people without a roof over their heads for days, provisionally provided for by the Red Cross. The television showed a long protest march, it was still pouring down with rain, and at the head of this march was none other than Vilma Nunez. She was, of course, soaked to the skin but she energetically, and with a sense that this was self-evident, headed the procession for

those who were suffering severely as a result of the inaction of the government of the time, and which was no longer the Sandinista government. Vilma's ability to rise up against social injustice, to show genuine empathy for the victims AND to turn that into action came across strongly to the viewers.

In May 1990, only a few months after the change of government from the Sandinista to the conservative government under Violetta Chamorros, Vilma Nuñez and thirteen like-minded people founded the non-government human rights organisation CENIDH (Centro Nicaraguense de Derechos Humanos). She ensured that the CENIDH received international financial support, and was thus independent, and chaired the organisation until her retirement. But of course, this new chapter of her life was rather one of unrest and has remained so until today.

During the decades of work for CENIDH, Vilma and her team developed a special and completely new approach to human rights work. The usual, difficult and professional way of working was to listen to the victims, document facts, the charges made, and the help provided for victims. In addition to this, a training programme was introduced, which was implemented in steps and later adopted nationally. It allowed the victims to become new human rights workers. It has grown into a dense network whose members contribute valuable educational and informational work within the communities. Here it is not just a question of bullying or persecution but also of problems such as domestic violence, violence against women and children's rights.

Now, much of that which Vilma Nunez has worked and fought for since her youth now lies in ruins. In April 2018, about one and a half years ago, there was social unrest which developed within days into nationwide political protests. Tens of thousands took to the streets in many places and towns, demanding the resignation of both Daniel Ortega, who had been re-elected as president in 2007, and of his wife Rosario Murillo, named by him as his vice-president.

After initial meetings between the government and the opposition organised by the Catholic church, the power of the state struck with brutal violence. Many were killed - an estimated three hundred to five hundred victims - thousands were wounded and imprisoned. Forty years after the victory of the revolution, which was achieved with a huge loss of human life, uniting them in hope with the whole world and resulting in very strong international solidarity - forty years later the celebrated and admired revolutionary has once again turned the country into a dictatorship.

That is very hard to bear for many of us who have great sympathy for the Sandinista and who were at that time delighted that for once the "good ones" had won. We ask ourselves today whether such a development could have been foreseen from the beginning, whether the worldwide solidarity movement was too uncritical or perhaps even naive, and whether the relapse could have, or must have, been prevented.

This situation is much much more difficult to bear for people like Vilma Nuñez, and she asks herself the very same questions. She stands before the ruins of that which she and her colleagues had built, the government has revoked the title of legal body with regard to CUNIDH, has devastated, plundered and closed their offices. Several of her employees have had to flee abroad because they were, and still are, threatened.

Vilma Nuñez tells things as they are, lists the unlawful actions of the government and says publicly: "Daniel Ortega has betrayed the revolution". It demonstrates great courage as in doing so Vilma Nuñez puts herself in great danger, as she has so often done in her life.

Our media no longer report about the oppressed country of Nicaragua - and if this does occur, then in the sense of "things have calmed down".

That is but a superficial impression. Nothing has developed for the better, indeed the opposite is the case. The only reason for that calm is because people live in fear of their lives if they dare to leave their safe cover.

Thus, the work and the battle for the implementation of human rights will continue. Vilma Nuñez stands with her own person and her biography for the conviction that a society only has the chance to live peacefully and in safety, both within and beyond national borders, when human

rights are recognised and upheld. The path to a just society must, however, be paved through peaceful and legal means. Despite the outrage with which Vilma Nunez perceives the injustice and suppression, the use of violence to achieve her true aims is not an option for her. That is why we admire and honour her. She is a role model for us all, and we thank her.