

## Witnesses of an era 3

*Interview with Juan Tito Méndez, in April 2023, by the editor-in-chief of the journal, as part of the activities to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the coup d'état in Chile. .*

**Tell me, what year did you study at the University of Chile and how did you come to work at this university?**

My life as a student and professional is absolutely linked to the University of Chile. I always wanted to be a teacher, initially I wanted to be a primary school teacher, especially because I was passionate about literature, so I wanted to be a Spanish teacher. When I applied to university, I applied for Spanish as my first priority and Social Work as my second. One of my high school classmates entered the School of Social Service at the University of Chile. When I graduated from high school I had to go out to work, but one day I met her and she told me: “you should study Social Work”.

I had some doubts and I said to myself “I’m going to apply for both”. I chose Spanish and Social Service and in the end I opted for Social Work, Social Service. I made the following reflection: I wanted to study Spanish, but to dedicate myself to literature, I wanted to write. But I started to question myself because I thought “of course, but if I’m a writer I’m isolating myself from my proletarian roots, whereas if I study Social Service I’m going to work for my class and, besides, in my free time I’ll be able to write”. And that’s what made me choose Social Service, which I’ve always been very proud of.

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**So, to understand the historical moment, you entered Social Service in which year? After a year of having worked or while you were working?**

My first class was on 19 March, 1966. I remember it unforgettably because it was the same day my younger brother was born. At that time, there were about 400 girls and about 12 or 13 boys in the course, from different classes. In my first year there were two of us, and later another boy joined. There were 3 boys and more than 50 girls. I immediately felt very welcome; I felt that I had come home, moreover, because I had a very strong political vocation. I was very close to the Communist Youth, first at the Liceo Darío Salas, and then throughout my career. I only became a militant when I left university, because I had made a promise to my parents that I would “graduate first”, as it was very important to them that I was a professional.



**Can you tell us what training was like in those years?**

The training was very hard, I remember that we had classes all day long, from 8:30 in the morning until 13:00 and from 14:30 until 18:30. Including Saturdays from 9:00 to 14:00 in the afternoon, where we had the assistantships. Every year we had more than twelve subjects, which were annual and with formal exams. It was quite hard.

In addition, I had to experience part of the process of professional reorientation, which here in Chile was done by students, unlike in Argentina and Brazil, where it was led by professors. I especially remember the Second Latin American Congress of Social Work, which was led by students from the University of Concepción. And Manuel Rodríguez, a socialist comrade, was a milestone in the history of social work, because he presented a paper in which he turned social work on its head. Instead of talking about reconceptualisation, we said “no, what social work has to do is change its philosophy”. That meant putting an end to paternalism and becoming a real agent of change.

I was in my second year and I remember that these were very active discussions with colleagues from Talca, Temuco, Concepción and Valparaíso, which is why I am emphatic in saying that the process of reconceptualisation in Chile was created and led by the students. Of course, the academics began to join in, some very actively and others not so much, which is why when the coup came, those of us who had started this issue were made to pay the price, and it was very hard.

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**In 1968 there was the University Reform. We are talking about a process of change in many ways, how did you experience it?**

We had to change the schools' management, hold elections, the students were asking for the right to vote and we got it. In fact, a colleague of ours who was doing his internship met Lucía Sepúlveda<sup>1</sup> and invited her to the university to make a presentation for a competition for the chair of social medicine. Later, there was an election for a new head of school and she won, thanks to the massive vote of the students, despite the fact that our vote had less weight than that of the teachers.

This change proposed the active incorporation of students in the training processes, the University Reform and the reconceptualisation of Social Work itself. The majority of students and professors were in favour of all these transformations, but there were also many colleagues and professors who were against it. So, this polarisation is also linked

<sup>1</sup> Who would become the director of the School of Social Service at the University of Chile in 1973.



to the moment of the coup d'état, when we were exonerated, and those same people were the ones who "gave the scythe" to several of us.<sup>2</sup> But, look, we wanted to make a revolution and in a revolution you win or lose. We lost for different reasons.

### **Were you aware of the implications and risks of this period?**

I think we were very voluntarist. We were convinced that the political process was growing towards a socialist revolution that nobody could stop, and we were also very naïve in thinking that Chile was a country with a "republican and democratic" history. In Chile "nothing is going to happen". We saw what was happening in Brazil, Bolivia and Argentina, with the coups d'état, and we thought that "it's not going to happen" in Chile. I think we made mistakes of voluntarism, of naivety, of not measuring the consequences (...). It was like a dwarf defying a giant. And that's what happened to us, because on 11 September we were with a group of comrades in the workplaces, waiting for the instructions that were broadcast on the radios, especially on radio Balmaceda, which was the radio station of the Communist Party.

On the day of the coup d'état, we were waiting for instructions at 321 Condell Street, which was the house where the school was, and suddenly we heard the planes pass by, climbed onto the terrace and saw the bombing of La Moneda. It was terrible, and at that moment we realised who we wanted to fight. Beforehand we had a series of instructions on what to do in the event of a coup d'état, what measures to take, where to go and how to take care of ourselves, in case we had to go underground. The communist party immediately went underground and we stayed there waiting for instructions. Instructions that never came. And the time came when the curfew started at about three o'clock in the afternoon and we asked ourselves: "What do we do"? and the slogan was: take care of yourselves and go home.

### **What were the days after the coup like?**

I left that day with nothing. Then, after about two or three weeks, we were allowed to enter the offices, they gave us an hour's permission to enter and take out our things. At that time, I didn't even take out a book, because I thought that anything could give me away. That day, when I went in, my whole office was upside down and all my books were in a pile on top of the desk (...) It was a very difficult process because the first week after the coup the revolutionary spirit was still very much alive, that we had to prepare ourselves, so it was a matter of waiting..., because at some point we had to go

<sup>2</sup> Expression to indicate that a final blow is struck with the "scythe".

and support that (...) But then came the disenchantment of “no more”, and a rather sad but idealised process followed, which was like reconnecting with people who were having a bad time and who you knew. On many occasions I had to visit former comrades who were worse off than me, to contain them, to give them or share support, or simply to see each other, because we were alone.

At that time, I had three fundamental pillars: 1) my wife and my daughter, who had just been born; 2) the university, teaching; and 3) the Party. First, they took away my university, they took away my teaching, and then I was left without a party. However, for a while some of us continued to contact people in support actions, trying to find alternatives, albeit clandestinely. One of them was to go into exile, but I did not want to leave, because I felt that my wife and daughter did not have to pay that cost, as it was not clear whether we would be able to return. Staying was not just a personal decision, but an order from my Party. And I accepted it for the reasons I have mentioned.

But then, many of my references, ex-partisans, left, others died, disappeared, and I was left alone. Suddenly, I looked at myself, and I was in a situation of absolute loneliness, without the university, without my party, clinging only to the protection of my family. Little has been said about these processes, because at the beginning we were still on adrenaline, and then the stupor began, when we started to realise what was happening. Fear, sometimes panic, sometimes poverty.

### **What was it like when you left university?**

It was complex, because in that period there was the added shock of a country where human rights were being violated and people were being killed. These issues are not stories, they are real, I saw many people killed and it affected many of my colleagues and students of Social Service.

We teachers were exonerated in November 1973, but the university made the resignation valid in March, so for four months I had the salary of a full-time lecturer. But from March 1974 it was all over. And as a matter of fighting my own poverty, I became a shopkeeper. And I chose the humblest of trades, a salesman, I sold fish in the street. I would go out at 5:50 in the morning and buy the things I was going to sell, then sell them in the neighbourhood where I went to live later, because I had to move house. I was also a painter, a bricklayer, I worked in everything I could. So, there are other phenomena, also painful, because the stupor, the fear, the panic, sometimes it was a

personal, individual thing; but it was also painful when you realised that some people shunned you, they stopped greeting you, even ex-colleagues or colleagues turned away, as if you had leprosy.

**I understand that you were in a very complex position.**

Many students started to visit me, saying “teacher, let’s get together, tell us about social service”. As meetings were forbidden, we would get together in small groups of four or five to be able to talk, to contain, to be able to do some mourning for the colleagues who were killed, disappeared and even committed suicide, because we had to support those who were worse off. At that time, I didn’t have the support tools that I later had when I went into psychiatry. These are some of the pains I experienced during that period, when I was left without a university, without a party and my only refuge was my family. At that time, I went through a reconversion and I said to myself “no, here I only dedicate myself and my family”. As I always liked studying, I decided to make my life this way.

At the time of the coup d’état I was 26 years old, I was a young person with a family and I soon realised that the dictatorship would be long. I had to change what was my initial project. My main aim was to protect my family, which meant working in whatever I could to survive, and to ensure that my daughter lacked for nothing, because during that period we lived in extreme poverty. In fact, I was unemployed for about four years and that was the darkest period of all, because there was a huge political, economic and social crisis and I was very interested in my wife being able to continue studying.

A friend of ours, a graduate of the Alejandro del Río School, who worked at the El Peral Sanatorium, invited me to do her prenatal replacement, after which I was hired and my work as a therapist began. I worked for 7 years in psychiatry, first at the El Peral hospital, and then in a private clinic, after obtaining a scholarship from the British Council to do a specialisation internship in England.

**What about your wife? Tell me, how did the Social Service students experience this process?.**

My wife was studying for her degree. She had studied psychology before, she had had some subjects validated, so she had subjects from different years. The first thing that happened was that immediately after the coup d’état, the university was closed. The



University of Chile stopped functioning, salaries were paid in places that were not the usual places, and you didn't know how to continue, and it was like that for a whole semester, until the end of 1973.

The following year, in 1974, some schools were reopened, among them the School of Social Service of the University of Chile, but no longer in Condell Street, but in the Pedagogical building, under the wing of the Faculty of Social Sciences. My wife finished her degree at the University of Chile. In fact, she had to do some internships in the middle of the dictatorship, which means she must have spent at least two and a half years at the University of Chile. Therefore, I did not experience the closure of the school and neither did she, directly.

I think what happened was that there was no entry of new students, and for whatever reason they tried to get rid of all the students who were there, but there was no new entry until the School of Social Service, now transformed, appeared in the IPS (Instituto Profesional de Santiago). That was after the dictatorship's reform of higher education. The School of Social Service must have been a thorn in the side of the coup plotters and the right wing, because it was a very rebellious school, with a strong social and political conscience. As a result, many former colleagues were assassinated or disappeared. They practised revolutionary social work, they lived in the villages, they had a very transforming vision, and so for the university, "that university", it was a problem.

### **When did you return to teaching at the university?**

I took advantage of that period of working in psychiatry to study a lot and train myself. In 1985, I applied for a position in the Gendarmerie, where I worked for 21 years. In the meantime, I continued studying and specialising in criminology. But in 1989, I felt that I could return to the university on my own, because I wanted to teach.

It wasn't easy to go back, I first tried IPS and it didn't go well, then I went to the Instituto Profesional del Pacífico and asked for an interview with the director of the school. And so I started teaching again. At the same time, I worked and continued studying. First I did a diploma course, then a master's degree at the USACH (University of Santiago de Chile), where I stayed teaching for a few years. Later, I started teaching a criminology elective at the Catholic University, a course I held and taught in various places for 14 years. Little by little I added other subjects, such as group methodology, ethics and planning. That was until 2004, when I retired from the Gendarmerie in 2005 and started studying again.

For the last 10 years, I have been teaching professional ethics, methodologies of social work with groups and workshops of Approach to Social Reality, at UTEM (Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana). I am fascinated by these subjects. I also love teaching first year students. It's like kneading fresh clay and I have worked with clay.

I know some of you may wonder why I am still teaching when I am already retired. For me there are two reasons why I continue to teach. The first is because I like it, I enjoy it, I love it. And the second is because I feel that I am fulfilling a moral commitment that I acquired when I studied, because I didn't pay a penny to study at the University of Chile, education was free. So, when I was invited to UTEM, I said to myself, "it's my duty... It's my duty to give back to society what society gave me". Because of this, I feel I am fulfilling a moral commitment to my society.

### **Something you would like to contribute to the closing of this interview.**

I am an old-fashioned social worker. Operational, even if critical social workers are annoyed when you say you are operational. But I am operational, in the sense that I worked directly with psychiatric patients and families, with prisoners and their families. I had a long career, and I look back and say "well, I didn't do badly after all". I did my life, I did my profession, I'm still doing it and here I am ("singing in the sun like a cicada, after four years underground").

**Biography of Juan Tito Méndez (interviewee):** Social worker at the University of Chile. He was a professor at the School of Social Service of that university until 1973, he has numerous specialisations and a long career in public management in mental health and prison services. He is currently a professor at the School of Social Work at the Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana (UTEM).

E-mail: [juantitomendez@gmail.com](mailto:juantitomendez@gmail.com)

**Biography of Gabriela Rubilar Donoso (interviewer):** Professor at the University of Chile, currently an academic in the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Social Sciences, linked to the Interdisciplinary Studies Centre in Social Work.

E-mail: [grubilar@uchile.cl](mailto:grubilar@uchile.cl)

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4635-9380>