

— • *Introduction by Elena Poniatowska* • —

That woman with regal carriage sweeping the air with her arms is called Nellie Campobello. That woman with her hair pulled back stretching her neck and pointing one toe is Nellie. Gloria and Nellie are dancing in their School of Dance. They twirl around, their skirts like corollas. From above they look like huge flowers: Mexican dahlias formed of a dozen petticoats.

“Now, a dance from Jalisco.”

The two sisters give a demonstration.

“You must make your body speak, give it more meaning.”

Nellie launches herself. This is her moment, her body movements are immediately noticeable. They are a faster form of expression than writing. And they have an immediate response, too. Clustered against the walls, her pupils watch her admiringly.

“Mexicans are silent, canny, I mean the people who live in the country. The way they move is the way they really express themselves.”

The two sisters are now teaching Mayan rhythms.

“Stronger, shorter steps. The mestizo’s way of walking is both graceful and concise.”

Nellie laughs.

“Well, the Mayans are not as tall as I am; so there’s almost a biological reason why their dance tempos and steps are short, light, and lively.”

Nellie and Gloria Campobello have traveled from one end of Mexico to the other, collecting indigenous rhythms. The Indians they love the most are the Tarahumarans, for the sisters are a part of their land. The two northerners go to all the fiestas, and if there isn’t one on, they sit in the central plazas and watch what’s happening. From their notes, from the loving gaze they cast upon Mexico, are born words in motion: “The native of Mexico State,” they write, “walks with his body weight over his heels, like the people from the Yucatán except that unlike them, he doesn’t stretch his body up nor tilt it backward, rather he leans forward, although not so much as the Michoacán Indian . . . With his eyes always fixed on the ground and with his arms tucked tight against his body, he gives the impression that as he walks he is embracing himself.”

In 1940, Nellie is known as a ballerina, choreographer, ballet teacher. She is especially interested in prehispanic dance. “Indigenous dance is the purest expression of Mexico.” Named Director of the National School of

Dance in 1937, Nellie is one of its founders; from there she immerses herself in our culture and brings it to life. Mexico unveils itself. Nellie unveils her creative capacity, the strength of her great country.

Its poverty, mistrust, betrayal, and violence . . . she lived them all in her childhood in Villa Ocampo and Parral, Durango; but she could still declare, "I was quite a happy child," for in her childhood her mother knew how to create another world: a charmed world that mitigated the immediate reality—the harshness of Revolution.

In the parish church of Villa Ocampo—where, above all, the people have fond memories of their native daughter and benefactress (the local school bears her name)—lie the records of the birth of María Francisca, born on the 7th of April 1900, natural daughter of Rafaela Luna. Nellie invented more recent birthdates, 1907, 1909. And Doña Concha Encarnación Estrada, at ninety years old, remembers playing with Nellie as a little girl, then called "Xica" (for Francisca) and a couple of years younger than Concha.

In an interview with Carlos Landeros in number 301 of the cultural supplement of *Siempre!* in 1957, Martín Luis Guzmán declared: "Probably nothing has given me more satisfaction, apart from my personal acquaintance with Villa, than having in my own hands Villa's personal archive that is kept by his widow, Doña Austreberta Rentería, and that Señorita Nellie Campobello brought to me when she interviewed me—some thirty years ago—as a part of a full portrait of Francisco Villa proposed to help the Villa cause . . . Thanks to those papers I got the idea for the right form for the *Memorias de Pancho Villa* (*Memoirs of Pancho Villa*) and in fact the first three hundred pages of the *Memorias* are based to a great extent on those same papers." Later on he emphasizes: "One day, I believe, we will all know about that personality I mentioned a moment ago, that admirable young lady, Nellie Campobello, who has been a staunch admirer, a tireless defender, of the person and the memory of Pancho Villa for more than forty years . . ."

Don Martín finished the five books of the *Memorias de Pancho Villa* with the battles in the Bajío, before the downfall of the warrior. Nellie Campobello, despite her unquenchable enthusiasm, finishes her *Apuntes sobre la vida militar de Pancho Villa* with the compromising truce of the chief and his withdrawal to the Canutillo hacienda given to him by the revolutionary government.

Martín Luis Guzmán shows through the character of Axkaná González in *La sombra del caudillo* that ineptitude and corruption converted into governing power have existed for over fifty years and that there is no doubt about "the tragedy of the politician caught in the web of immorality and lies that he himself has spun"; the aging Mariano Azuela rails against the

profiteers, the big landowners, the local chieftains, the new rich, the venal leaders who betrayed the ideals of the Revolution; but to Nellie Campobello it seems that the Revolution has revindicated the rights and the dignity of the people and that the heroes who emerged from the people are our lay saints. A true devotee, she most strongly defends Pancho Villa, her hero, her idol—despite the bloody orgies—her Golden Soldier to whom she dedicates hours and days of research, with his troops and fighters: Nieto, Dávila, and Maynez, Nellie collects testimonies—from one of his widows, Austreberta Rentería—and writes it all down, passionately. In spite of her admiration, of all her books *Apuntes sobre la vida militar de Francisco Villa* is the least significant. Uncritical, Nellie chooses to see only the wood, never the trees. Jesusa Palancares, the protagonist of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, has a much more critical view of the Mexican Revolution, although she could neither read nor write. She says: “I think it was a bad war because that business of killing each other off, fathers against sons, brothers against brothers; Carranza’s men, and Villa’s, and Zapata’s . . . well that was a lot of nonsense ’cos we were all in the same boat: poor as church mice and half dead of starvation. But those are the things that, as they say, everyone knows and nobody ever tells.” Jesusa doesn’t have the same image of Francisco Villa left to us by Nellie, either: “Villa was a bandit because he didn’t fight like a man but boasted of dynamiting the tracks as the trains went by. . . . If there’s anyone I really hate, it’s Villa.”

Almost fifty years have gone by and, as Adolfo Gilly says: “The Mexican bourgeoisie’s affirmation that the ‘revolution lives’ is the negative confirmation of the permanent nature of the interrupted revolution.” Octavio Paz is even more condemnatory: “Every revolution that has no critical thought, no freedom to contradict the powerful and no possibility of peaceful substitution of one government for another, is a revolution that is self-defeating.”

With her strong, singular personality, so important in dance and the Mexican dance movement, member of the group of writers of the Revolution, Nellie never received the recognition that would stimulate her vocation as a writer. If she had, she would not now be eighty-seven years old and isolated in Tlaxcala, far from the community of writers. The mere fact that key characters in the culture of our country, like Orozco, Martín Luis Guzmán and Carlos Pellicer, endorse them gives the Campobello sisters (whose biography still waits in the wings) the value that has been so stingily accorded elsewhere. The cruelty that cradled Nellie’s childhood enfolds her old age, too.

The Mexican Revolution is institutionalized and also novelized. Six years after it begins, in 1916, Mariano Azuela publishes *Los de abajo* (*The Underdogs*), the novel of the Mexican Revolution par excellence, which opens the floodgates with the character Demetrio Macías, of whom Azuela

himself admitted: "If I had known a man of his stature, I would have followed him to the death." From Azuela on, the novel of the Revolution takes off at a gallop: Martín Luis Guzmán produces *La sombra del caudillo* and *El águila y la serpiente* (*The Eagle and the Serpent*), giving Mexico the best prose it had known to date. Guzmán is followed by Gregorio López y Fuentes, Rafael F. Muñoz, José Ruben Romero, José Vasconcelos, Francisco L. Urquiza, José Mancisidor, Mauricio Magdaleno, Agustín Yáñez, and José Revueltas. Among them one single woman: Nellie Campobello. The publication in 1958 of *La región más transparente* (*Where the Air Is Clear*), by Carlos Fuentes, gives the novel of the Revolution its second wind, since Rulfo and his *Pedro Páramo* (1955) are a different phenomenon. Fuentes' important work opens the door to Arturo Azuela (nephew of the first Azuela), to Fernando del Paso, to Ibarguengoitia, for whom the Revolution is a huge joke, to Tomás Mojarro, and once again to a single woman: Elena Garro, who to a certain extent is Nellie Campobello's successor. Ibarguengoitia's *Los relámpagos de agosto* (*The Lightning of August*) flips the other side of the coin—a comic, uninhibited Revolution, a Revolution to be made fun of, a Revolution that doesn't take itself seriously, that flees from tragedy, while Rulfo is the very essence of the tragic. *It may be that Nellie Campobello's is the only real vision of the Mexican Revolution written by a woman.* When she dedicates her *Apuntes sobre la vida militar de Francisco Villa* to Guzmán, naming him the best revolutionary writer of the Revolution, she doesn't recognize that she is the best woman writer of the Revolution. Her words—freed from adjectives and embellishments—her direct, almost raw, style, belong to an Adelita who is off to join the battle.

Nellie Campobello publishes *Cartucho: Relatos de la lucha en el norte* in Ediciones Integrales in 1931, yet of all the novelists of the Revolution she is the one who gets the least notice. In a *macho* world, she is not taken into account, and—give me a break—what's a woman doing at the shotgun orgy, anyway? That's all we need; Nellie's too amusing, Nellie's too descriptive, Nellie's too "clever," so she is relegated to giving impressions, brilliant images seen from the balcony: a curious creature leafing inadvertently through a ghastly book that has nothing to do with her. And that's how she tells it, naïvely, with the candor of childhood: scenes that astonish in their cruelty and because they are witnessed by a little girl.

Death by Bullets: Her Familiar World

From having seen so many bloody deeds, Nellie thought that she could tell the future; after all, she was well acquainted with death, since everyone fell right outside her window, like stringless puppets. The sharp, wise little

girl is also a temperamental little girl, tempted by danger, a little girl who is not and never will be a little girl, except at her mother's hands; or perhaps a little girl who never grew up and petrified inside that slim body, made for dancing (the Campobello sisters were very beautiful). Nellie doesn't invent anything she tells; she saw, she lived, she recorded it all. Her vision was not that gentle contemplation of other normal little girls, but episodes of brutality, of monstrous atrocity. The only sweetness in her life comes from those two hands, her mother's hands, and at the age when other children's heads lie on the pillow and listen to their mothers sing of "Little golden sparrows . . . in a crystal cage," Nellie doesn't recall snowy swans and fairy princes: her only swans are Villa and his Golden Boys, the only real characters are the Villa men who take her in their arms, give her her favorite chewy caramels. For Nellie, there are no little old grandmamas, only wolves, and as Antonio Castro Leal says, the intrepid Nellie "never gets frightened, nor sentimental." The one thing that moves her is the memory of her mother, a peaceful haven in the thick of the bullets. Nellie marries off her dolls to nice young revolutionaries. And if fate doesn't smile on the chosen one, the engagement is easily undone! "No, no; he was never Pitaflora's boyfriend . . ." She—daughter of a father lost on the battlefield of Ojinaga—picks out a corpse for herself; right outside her house. She thinks rather pretty General Sobarzo's rosy innards. She watches firing squads, sees men hanged, witnesses the most summary of judgments, all with the delicious freshness of someone watching a great show with neither nostalgia for the past nor plans for the future: "a virgin vision of the Revolution."

The Childhood of Revolution or the Child of the Revolution

Ever since, Nellie writes as if she were firing bullets. Her sentences always hit the bull's eye, scorch with their directness, their absolute lack of elaboration. Unlike other writers of the Revolution, Nellie never criticizes it; on the contrary, she maintains almost as much devotion for the Revolution as she does for her mother. She feels no mistrust; everything it does is well done, everything can be justified, everything has its reason. She is still the little girl who sees a group of ten men take aim at one young man on his knees, badly wounded, his hands outstretched toward the soldiers, already dying from fear. She notices with interest how the body gives a terrible leap as the bullets hit it, how the blood gushes from numerous holes. It lies three days next to her window and Nellie gets used to the scrawny pile; when someone or other carries it off in the night, she misses it. "That dead body really belonged to me."

Accustomed to violence, to cruelty, Nellie's familiar world is the world of executed men. They are a part of her childhood. In *Las manos de Mamá*

she bequeathes us memorable pages about her mother, the real one and the other one: the Revolution. Her mother is a heroine who, as well as sewing on her machine to support her children, runs out to save people dear to her, and runs back in again to hem petticoats, turn up cuffs for little girls of school age. But “What was the poor little noise of that machine compared with the shouts of the cannon? . . . How many pounds of flesh would they come to in total? How many eyes and thoughts?” Strange little girl who thinks of heavy gunfire as a song and talks of the pounds of flesh made up by the dead bodies.

Rulfo as a child saw the sinister puppets of the hanged men, and no one covered Nellie’s eyes, either; on the contrary, they were opened wide to see all the better. In *Mis libros* she says: “More than three hundred men shot in as many moments, inside a barracks, leaves a big, big impression—so people said—but our childish eyes found it quite normal.”

Nellie uses some very happy turns of phrase: “Jiménez is a dusty little town. Its streets are like hungry tripes.” The little girl who drinks coffee with sugared bread, milk with sweet potato (curiously enough, Jesusa Palancares also likes milk with sweet potato best) accepts her fate presided over by a wonderful mother. “My life was a counterpane of colors.” Nellie writes fast, doesn’t pay much attention to style. “You have to do things quickly. That way you don’t feel frightened.”

What does a writer do when her childhood is a battlefield? What does a little girl do when her friends are men on horseback galloping into her house and scarring the hallway with their hooves? What does a girl do when she is born in Mexico with the new century and she’s going to see not only the landscape after the fighting but also the birth of the Mexico that emerges from the roots of the Revolution and where everything has to be done, everything has to be invented, education and health, art and play, language and freedom and loving love between equal partners? For the Campobello sisters dancing the Revolution are a part of that effervescence that spills over in the twenties and whose fascination still hasn’t died down. Mexico is transformed through the toil and the magic of its art into a lodestone; lured by our so-called Renaissance come André Breton and Antonin Artaud, Emily Edwards, Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, D. H. Lawrence, Anita Brenner, Frances Toor, Carleton Beals, William Spratling, and, later, Anna Seghers, Valle Inclán, Graham Greene, and many many more. The walls of Mexico are potential frescoes; they exist to be painted on. History will spread itself before the eyes of the people in huge images that will teach them their true worth; Diego Rivera is painting, and Siqueiros; and Orozco, in love with Gloria Campobello, illustrates *Las manos de Mamá* by her sister Nellie: not only muralism is important, it’s also a time for ways of living, ways of loving, to flourish in Mexico. Miguel and Rosa Covarrubias set out to cover the entire republic unearthing pre-

hispanic relics, and after their book on Bali they publish their extraordinary *Mexico South*. Lupe Marín is a black panther and one day when Diego Rivera doesn't give her any money for the market, she serves him up for lunch a delicious stew of pottery shards. Dr. Atl, Julio Castellanos, Roberto Montenegro, Fito Best Maugard, the Contemporáneos, Rufino Tamayo, Rodríguez Lozano, Juan O'Gorman—the twenties and thirties are extraordinarily fertile for Mexico. Lázaro Cárdenas opens the doors to Spanish refugees, as earlier they were opened to Trotsky. The muralists attract many foreigners; mural painting is a center of energy, mural painting displaces the art from one continent with another newly emergent. Admiration is now directed to Mexico as it was to Florence; to Teotihuacan as it was to Cheops; to Chichen Itzá and Uxmal as it was to the Coliseum, to the new nation that erupted from its own battles and that conquered, alone and before the Russian Revolution, its liberty.

Contemporary of Extraordinary Women

Nellie Campobello is the contemporary of a series of extraordinary women: María Izquierdo, Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, Lupe Marín, Nahui Olín, María Asúnsolo, Dolores del Río. She belongs to a Mexico in the process of discovering itself and fascinated by itself and fascinating other seers, this Mexico-divine-Narcissus, this Mexico-creole-Ulysses, this Mexico-Prometheus-enchained, Mexico naming itself and appearing on the face of the earth, Mexico of the creation and of the seventh day, that without ado sets out to name the things of the earth, to turn them over to see how and of what they are made, to spread them out in the evening like Carlos Pellicer who with his Brother Sun places the evenings any old where, sky up and earth down like the great Olmec heads scattered like meteorites in Tabasco's jungles. The Mexican Revolution is an authentic popular movement; some women also stand tall and toss their angry heads long before any feminist movement in Latin America. Splendid figures like Concha Michel, Benita Galeana, and Magdalena Mondragón, although their works are not the equal of their heroic profiles. A northerner like Nellie, Magdalena Mondragón is the nonconformist author of *Los presidentes me dan risa*, banned in the bookstores as subversive.

Being a trooper means tightening one's belt, having a staunch heart and a strong character. These two women writers know what they are up against, and if not, they intuit it. Nevertheless, Nellie is not an activist, she has no political ambition whatsoever (the Revolution cured her once and for all); nor does she want any type of honors (although she regrets that she is not recognized as she should be in literature). She sticks to her art: dance and literature, literature and dance; the *danse macabre* of the Revo-

lution alongside the dance that should be created in our country, the dance that integrates its multiple, different aspects, popular dance whose clacking heels should be a part of the formal dance schools and solidify the country's nationalism with the steps that come from far off and tell of the people, the *adelitas*, the rhymes and sayings, the *ayayays* that fly across the guitar strings. As Concha Michel gathers in one book the entire republic in its *corridos*, verses, and popular rhythms, Nellie and her sister "Gloriecita," as she calls her, collect steps and movements, arms and legs, her mother's steps on the earth, her mother the essential figure in her life, her guide through life, ". . . she gave us her songs; her feet embroidered dance steps for us" . . . Orozquian figures, Guzmanian figures, revolutionary figures, suffering figures, newborn figures, birthing figures. "Mama, dance for me, sing, give me your voice. . . . I want to see you embroider your eternal dance for me."

"Mama, turn your head. Smile as you did then, twirling in the wind like a red poppy that is shedding its petals."

And this plea from the depths: ". . . and I, a woman now, dressed in white and without makeup, cried out over the door: 'Mama, Mama, Mama!'"

(Translated by Irene Matthews)