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Interview: Ingrid Betancourt

She is the French-Colombian politician who was kidnapped by Farc guerrillas in 2002 and released last July in a daring rescue operation. Back in Paris, she talks to Ed Vulliamy about the spiritual discipline that got her through six years of torture and humiliation in the jungle - and the sweet pleasures of freedom

Ed Vulliamy
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Former Colombian guerrilla hostage Ingrid Betancourt. Photograph: Pedro Armestre/Getty Images

Ingrid Betancourt rushes into the tiny café where we have arranged to meet. Leaving behind her the crush of Parisians doing their Christmas shopping in the little streets of the Latin Quarter, she says: 'I love crowds, I love it that people are concerned about the little things in life, doing this or that. I love it that after six years of torture, people greet me and want their picture taken with me.'

Betancourt - who as Le Monde put it is 'belle, fragile et forte, en même temps' (beautiful, fragile and strong, at the same time) - is the French-Colombian politician who was kidnapped in 2002 and held captive by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrillas, better known as Farc, in the Colombian jungle for six years - then released in a dramatic rescue operation in July.

When Betancourt stepped on to the tarmac of Bogotá airport in the summer to be reunited with her family, it was the culmination of a long international campaign on a political and personal level. Her second husband, Juan Carlos Lecompte, had travelled from village to village through the Colombian jungle, and flown over it, distributing appeals and pictures of Betancourt's children. Her teenage daughter, Melanie, had organised rallies under the Arc de Triomphe, brandishing her mother's portrait.

Ingrid Betancourt Pulecio was born in Bogotá and raised among a Franco-Latin elite in Paris, daughter of Colombia's ambassador to Unesco. Her parents' apartment on the Avenue Foch was something of a salon for homesick intelligentsia from South America, and she remembers reading poetry with Pablo Neruda. From this background she went to the 'Sciences Po' or Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, a training ground for France's political elite, where she befriended Dominique de Villepin, who became Prime Minister of France, and Fabrice Delloye, a future diplomat whom she married in 1983.

They had two children, Melanie and Lorenzo; the family were posted to the United States, the Seychelles and New Zealand.

Betancourt's life changed suddenly with the 1989 assassination of the Colombian Liberal politician Carlos Luis Galán, who had challenged the government's connections to cocaine cartels. Her mother, Yolanda Pulecio, a former Miss Colombia and active member of Galán's inner circle, had been with Galán at the rally and escaped the line of fire only because her heel got stuck, causing her to stumble.

Enraged, Betancourt decided to return to Colombia and go into politics herself. In 1994, she was elected as a Liberal to the Chamber of Representatives and, in 1998, she ran for the Senate, winning more votes than any other candidate. She was - ironically, with hindsight - persuaded by the incoming President, Andres Pastrana, to support peace talks with Farc, and met Farc's leadership, including its commander, Manuel Marulanda.

By the time she announced her candidacy to become President in 2002, promising an offensive against the narcos, Betancourt had made enemies - especially since Farc had become a narco-cartel itself. 'During my captivity,' she says now, 'I felt abandoned by everyone apart from my family and supporters, because there was no part of the political spectrum that would want me released. I had alienated everyone in the establishment, and the guerrillas were my kidnappers. My release was to no one's advantage.'

On 23 February 2002, Betancourt took her campaign into the contested zone of San Vicente del Caguán, in southern Colombia. She was stopped at a Farc checkpoint and taken hostage with 15 others - including American contractors and Colombian policemen and soldiers.

Some accounts of kidnap deal with moments of communication with captors, attempts to create some form of contact: a shared football team, a joke, a song, anything. But in her case, says Betancourt, 'all communication was forbidden. And anyway, at first I could not even think about other people's reactions, only my own. I was alone both as a kidnapped person, and within myself'.

That loneliness was compounded when, two months later, reading one of the few newspapers she saw during her captivity, she saw that her father had died from a respiratory illness, commonly said to have been caused by despair at his daughter's abduction. 'I carry the voices of all my family within me, and they were with me there in the jungle. But if I had a voice of my own in captivity, I lost it at that point. I was stretched to the limits of emptiness and sorrow.'

For the six years she was a captive, Betancourt was unsure as each dawn broke whether or not she would see another sunset. With her fellow hostages, she would be encamped at bases made of wood and palm leaves, for days, weeks or months at a time, then moved on, marching in single file, through humid jungle temperatures of 40 degrees, from the unknown into the unknown.

'In captivity,' she says, 'one loses every way of acting over little details which satisfy the essentials of life. Everything has to be asked for: permission to go to the toilet, permission to ask a guard something, permission to talk to another hostage - to brush your teeth, use toilet paper, everything is a negotiation. If they sense any resistance, you do not get what you want. And I think I was a symbol of everything they hated - I was a woman, not only from the oligarchy, but French-Colombian, who had had the opportunities of a world and culture denied them.'

She made five attempts to escape from the night encampments: 'And what joy it was just not to be with the guards. To sleep under the stars, instead of in a hut, or beneath the foliage!' But after recapture, 'the torture became worse'.

Today in Paris as she sips Coca-Cola, she says that 'with time' she will recount what happened. 'I was abused, humiliated, insulted and tortured.' Tortured how? 'Physically and mentally', is all she will say. 'I was chained, after the first escape attempt, initially by night, later throughout night and day.' At one point, 'I was made to stand for, I think, three days and nights, chained by the throat, to a tree.'

Part of the punishment was to repair the guerrillas' webbing and ammunition belts. This work involved using string with which Betancourt managed to weave herself a rosary, 'which I carried with me everywhere, and still do'.

Much research has been done on survival strategies by kidnap victims, and many stories told by those who have endured kidnap, concentration camps or solitary confinement. They share a basic pattern: there is the inner, as well as outer, battle for survival. A friend of mine called Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo spent 22 years in solitary confinement in Cuba playing chess in his head. The BBC journalist Alan Johnston, kidnapped in Gaza, said: 'The only thing I could control was my state of mind: "One day this is going to end, and you're going to need to look back, so try not to let yourself down."' Others have fallen into what is called the Stockholm syndrome, of subjugation to their kidnappers. Whatever Betancourt did, it was the defiant opposite of that.

'To start with I had my personality, my life, the blessing of being a free woman, and my family,' Betancourt says. 'Then, though, came the idea that I had to learn everything again, undergo an apprenticeship of existence and identity. I had to recognise that there were things I did not like within myself, having to be this person - captive, chained, tortured. So the apprenticeship began: who am I, here? I needed to look inside myself and I saw that I had my God, and dignity.'

Stories from hostages held with Betancourt speak of her as a centre of gravity which helped them to preserve their own dignity. For a time, she found herself teaching the other hostages French, and the 'Marseillaise'. A Colombian police officer called John Frank Pinchao, released before Betancourt, said: 'Ingrid never cries; she is too strong for that.'

'Perhaps I was a point of gravity,' she says, 'but it is not that simple. The others were my point of gravity, too. I looked up to them hundreds of times, learned a lot from them - about which gestures might open and which might shut channels of communication with the guards. Which moves would be more likely to get you a piece of toilet paper or toothbrush. And about when to say or do nothing. So we were each other's centre of gravity.'

Betancourt did have some contact with the world: like Alan Johnston, she was allowed a radio, and heard her mother's appeals for her release: 'Her words, her voice, her wisdom, they reminded me of her, and therefore of who I was. Hearing my mother made it clear how alone I was as a woman in a world entirely of men.'

Betancourt's release cut through the apparently deadlocked debate between the two approaches to dealing with political kidnappers: the never-bargain-with-terrorists school, and the route of parley and compromise. Operation Jaque, the rescue plan, was, she says, 'neither a negotiation or a military operation, and this is important. It was an operation using intelligence.' Intelligent it certainly was. 'The people who came to snatch me did so as a confidence trick: they were completely unarmed.'

The pressure on Colombia's hard-line President Álvaro Uribe Vélez had become extreme, not only from Betancourt's personal following, but from the US, which has always been reticent about, but never denied, its involvement in Operation Jaque. Farc's leader, Marulanda, died in March 2008, and his mantle passed to Alfonso Cano. In the same month one of Farc's commanders, Raúl Reyes, was killed by the state. Many feared this signalled the end of hope for Betancourt: Reyes had been high on the list of potential mediators and his death left Farc's leaders furious. In the event, though, it proved the key to Betancourt's release. 'What they found in Reyes's compound after his death gave them the keys to Farc's communications system,' she says. 'They managed to infiltrate the system.'

Colombia's secret services started speaking to the man in charge of the unit holding Betancourt, 'Cesar', pretending to be Cano. 'Cesar thought he was talking to his new commander, whom he had never met,' says Betancourt. 'He wanted to make a good impression, so when intelligence suggested he transfer the hostages to come and meet Cano, Cesar agreed.' A 'humanitarian' team aboard a helicopter was duly guided in by the duped sub-commander, disembarked wearing Che Guevara T-shirts, and helped all 15 hostages and Cesar aboard. Cesar and his guards were handcuffed, stripped and held to the floor, and the hostages told: 'We are the National Army. You are free.'

That is the happy ending. But it was also the start of Betancourt's resurrected life.

Listening to the radio, the captive Betancourt had known that her daughter, Melanie, was campaigning for her, and that her son Lorenzo 'became vocal too, when he turned 18. When I saw them again, it was with a feeling that we were the same people, but all so different. All I wanted to do was fill the gaps, in all our lives, theirs and mine.'

This has been her life, since July - apart from receiving the Legion d'Honneur, meeting the Pope, making a pilgrimage to Lourdes and 'preparing a book, very slowly'. Otherwise, she says, she has lived 'in a kind of retreat with my family, filling those gaps by just being a mother again. And that is not simple. Melanie is in New York, everything fantastic, but my son is 20 years old, has failed his grades and says "Maman, that's because I spent a year fighting for you" - which makes me, well, so proud of him. But I have to tell him: "Now we must decide what to do with your life, not mine."'

It was the indefatigable Paris Match that won the first interview on the plane when Betancourt flew back to Paris in July, and asked her about 'le retour à la civilisation', to which she replied: 'Adapting to pre-history was very difficult, but adapting to civilisation is immediate!' Can this be true, I ask her now. 'Yes!' she says. 'It took no time. After six years without seeing one, I love just seeing a smile - every smile I see gives me hope.'

This brings us to the kernel of the conversation: why is it that trauma and desolation can make people believe more insistently in the human spirit, rather than abandon all faith in it? 'Maybe this,' says Betancourt. 'I was in a situation where I had to make a decision: I could follow the path of cynicism, or that of some kind of spiritual discipline and faith. The first would be easy, the second very hard. The first is about ego, and what is happening in front of you. The second is about the battle inside you, beyond these events, that one that gives life meaning. I chose the hardest path, but once I had decided to follow that path, it was like having wings. I wanted to look at everything another way.

'Take the other hostages. When you live for so many years like that, with people you would not otherwise meet in life, you realise that humanity has a common soul. I thought about the guards too: if I am ever out of here, how will they remember me? Who will they tell themselves they are, if I try to communicate to them that I have taken this path, and not that of cynicism?'

This is redemptive Christianity, I suggest. 'You and I can call it that, but it is no specific faith,' she chides. 'It could be any religion. It is a deep belief in God and the human spirit. And that is why the return to civilisation is immediate. Because once I had made my decision, I never let go of that belief - not in the jungle, or since.'

Ingrid Betancourt: Life Story

1961 Ingrid Betancourt Pulecio is born on Christmas Day to Gabriel Betancourt and Yolanda Pulecio in Bogotá, Colombia.

1983 She graduates from Sciences Po in Paris and marries Fabrice Delloye. They have two children before later divorcing.

1989 A Liberal presidential candidate in Colombia is killed while Ingrid's mother is standing behind him; Ingrid decides to return to Colombia to enter politics.

1994 She is elected to the Chamber of Representatives.

1997 She marries Colombian advertising executive Juan Carlos Lecompte.

2002 Nine months after announcing she will run for President, she is captured by the guerrilla group Farc.

2008 She and 14 others are rescued in a mission launched by her former rival, President Álvaro Uribe.

They say: 'I have not seen another case where a single person exercised the kind of importance in international affairs that [Ingrid] did.' Pierre Vimont, French ambassador to the US

She says: 'I was in chains all the time, for three years. I tried to wear those chains with dignity, even if I felt it was unbearable.'

Hermione Hoby

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