

An interview with Mexican documentarian Juan Francisco Urrusti, director of *In Exile: A Family Film*

“The world should not be closing itself in—my father’s struggle was against all walls.”

By Kevin Mitchell
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On June 23, the WSWS posted a comment on *In Exile: A Family Film*, a documentary directed by Mexican filmmaker Juan Francisco Urrusti, which follows the story of Urrusti’s grandparents and parents as they live and fight during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and later become political exiles in Mexico.

The review suggested that the film was “an engrossing work” and that the viewer was “left with an indelible portrait of not only the times but of the human beings who fought fascism and strove to create a better world in the first several decades of the last century.”

At the same time, the WSWS criticized *In Exile* for its attitude toward the historical events in question. The film fails to explain why Franco’s fascist army triumphed over the forces of the bourgeois Republic in Spain, falling back on the empty argument that “the left was divided.” In fact, only the revolutionary mobilization of the working class and the poor peasants on a socialist program could have defeated Franco.

As Leon Trotsky explained in 1936: “From a purely military point of view, the Spanish revolution is much weaker than its enemy. Its strength lies in its ability to rouse the great masses to action. It can even take the army away from its reactionary officers. To accomplish this it is only necessary seriously and courageously to advance the program of the socialist revolution ...

“But the bourgeois [Republican] ministers cannot accept such a program. Curbing the social revolution, they compel the workers and peasants to spill ten times as much of their own blood in the civil war. And to crown everything, these gentlemen expect to disarm the workers again after the victory and to force them to respect the sacred laws of private property.”

Stalinism played a counterrevolutionary role in Spain. The bureaucracy in the Kremlin, allied with important sections of

the Spanish bourgeoisie, was terrified at the prospect of a working class revolt and did everything in its power to suffocate revolution and eliminate the revolutionaries.

The following interview was conducted via Skype with Mr. Urrusti at his home in Mexico City.

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Kevin Mitchell: What was your purpose in making *In Exile: A Family Films*?

Juan Francisco Urrusti: There are many films about the Spanish Civil War, and some of them I’ve known since I was a child. For instance, *The Spanish Earth* [1937] made by Joris Ivens and Ernest Hemingway. One of the most recent I liked was called *The Good Fight* [1984, Noel Buckner]. It’s an American film and has interviews with International Brigades veterans.

My purpose was not to tell another story about how the Spanish Civil War started and why it ended the way it ended. It’s more about the life stories of my family members and their own accounts, some of which were very difficult to get. Let’s say, it’s the human account—what it feels like to be a child in a village and see your friend wiped out by bombs or to have to cross the Pyrenees Mountains in winter with almost no clothes.

In my film, you see people from different backgrounds, political and cultural and geographical backgrounds.

In 1936-37, there was already the fight between anarchists and socialists, and Stalinists and Trotskyists, and people were very divided, but I do think they had to get together because they all had a common enemy that overpowered them, which was the Spanish army and the fascists.

Much later in life, I found out about these backgrounds and views. As a child, I didn’t know that this one was a Communist and this other one was an anarchist, this one was a syndicalist, this other one a Catalan nationalist. So, yes, in a way, the film is shallow. It doesn’t go into some of the reasons why the

Spanish Republic lost the war, but, on the other hand, it gives some of the background. As you said in your review, it doesn't go deeply into the history or give an analysis of the political situation.

KM: How did you come to make this particular "family" film?

JFU: I'm a documentary filmmaker and I had made films about indigenous cultures of Mexico. Ethnographic films, as you would call them, about the Maya, and I had not made a film about my own "tribe." I always felt like a minority in Mexico because my family came from another place, so I felt this need to know where they came from. I recorded them to help me obtain this knowledge. So this film was a way to say thank you to my family and to people who fought and suffered under fascism.

KM: What were some of the challenges in making it?

JFU: To start with, I didn't know much about the Spanish Civil War and I couldn't tell who was who. Of course I knew a couple of figures, like President Manuel Azaña and Francisco Franco, but only two or three. The rest of them were people whose pictures I'd never seen before and one of the challenges was to find footage that was authentic.

Paying for the footage was maybe the biggest challenge, because in 2014 much of the footage that had been in the public domain was no longer available.

Another challenge in the film was seeing people—my friends and family—disappear. Having to attend someone's funeral and edit film of them two or three days later was very rough. It changes your perspective: What should I leave out of the film? You don't want to leave anything out, but you have to, otherwise no one will want to see the film if you make it too long.

KM: What was it like growing up in such a political family?

JFU: Everyone was anti-fascist in one way or another. My family never lost its principles. My father, when he was a doctor, would treat people without money. He participated in political movements in Mexico. In 1968 he was put in jail for a couple of days. At the time many teachers and students suffered when President [Gustavo Díaz] Ordaz violently clamped down on protests during the Olympics.

I first knew my family was political when I was eight years old, and we wanted to go to Disneyland. We were stopped by American immigration and sent back to Mexico because they told my father, "You come from a Red family."

KM: How did you get involved in documentary film?

JFU: Some of the first films I saw were about the Second World War and the Spanish Civil War. They left a big imprint on my mind, especially the ones about concentration camps. Then I went on to study anthropology. I became interested in social anthropology and wanted to know Mexico better, especially indigenous Mexico. I've directed and produced numerous documentary films, and I've taught documentary films for 29 years in Mexico City.

KM: You premiered this film at the Leon Trotsky House Museum [Museo Casa de Leon Trotsky] in Coyoacán, in Mexico City. Can you say something about that?

JFU: I am very close to Verónica Volkov, Leon Trotsky's great-granddaughter, who is a writer and philosopher. I have known the Volkovs for a long time.

I was honored to have the screening of *In Exile* at the house where Trotsky lived and died. Verónica and her father, Esteban, were both there, as well as 70 to 80 people.

It was very moving and important that the film was screened there, because Trotsky was also a refugee. President [Lázaro] Cárdenas not only opened the door to Spanish refugees, but also to Trotsky and many others, including all those were being persecuted in Europe—Jews, Communists and Socialists during the Second World War.

KM: What do you think of Trotsky's struggle against Stalin and of his political legacy?

JFU: I think that Trotsky was right. Russia should not have closed itself in. He was one of the most important leaders; he was the revolution within the revolution. That's what Trotsky meant to me.

KM: What do you think of the current political situation facing immigrants and refugees?

JFU: I think it's disgusting. I have very little respect for Mr. Trump; I also have very little respect for Mr. Obama, because he also kicked out many Mexicans. I also have very little or no respect at all for Mexico's president [Enrique Peña Nieto]. Besides being very corrupt, he's also doing the very dirty job of stopping people in Mexico and harassing people coming from Central America. It's a disgrace; I think we live in very dark times.

The world should not be closing itself in—my father's struggle was against all walls. Now we have walls in Gaza and the United States, and the whole world is becoming a concentration camp. It was wrong to have the Berlin Wall, but it's right to have the border wall?

KM: What advice would you give future filmmakers?

JFU: I tell my students: try to see the world and present the world, but first you have to look into yourself and see what you have to give other people and what you can share with others. Try to be honest in your stories and in the way you treat others in your film. It's important to have respect for an audience and also respect for the people inside your frame.

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