



Rubén Vázquez

The Belisario Domínguez House Museum



Elsie Montiel

Few figures in the pantheon of our national heroes are as admired as Belisario Domínguez. As a senator, his clarity and valor in denouncing the treason and breach of principles of General Victoriano Huerta, the president of Mexico at the time, cost him his life, but were enough to immortalize him.

It was early 1913. Mexico was going through one of the bloodiest periods of the revolutionary struggle. Francisco I. Madero, who sparked the 1910 revolutionary movement and became



president of Mexico, was deposed and shortly thereafter assassinated together with Vice President José María Pino Suárez. The order had been given by Huerta who, with the complicity of his allies, several generals and the U.S. ambassador in Mexico, had staged a coup d'état, betraying Madero and making himself interim president. Huerta was feared by many. Everyone knew that his favorite weapon for fighting opposition was assassination. The country's senators behaved moderately, except Belisario Domínguez, who, on the occasion of Huerta's first report to the nation, presented a courageous speech on September 23, to be read in public session. In this speech, he made no concessions and denounced the president's actions, calling him

ignorant, an assassin and a traitor, reproaching his colleagues for their indecision and lack of character, demanding they denounce him before the people, depose him and save the republic. When the Senate refused to have his speech read and the national press refused to publish it, Belisario decided to print it himself to get public support for their representatives. Here is a sample of his words:

Look into yourselves, gentlemen, and answer this question: what would you say of the crew of a great ship that, during the most violent of storms and in a tempestuous sea, named as pilot a butcher who, with no nautical knowledge, was navigating for the first time and had no more recommendation than having betrayed and murdered the ship's captain?

One of his own colleagues denounced Belisario. The answer was ruthless: a few nights later, Huerta's thugs dragged him out of the Jardín Hotel, where he was staying in Mexico, took him to the Coyoacán cemetery and shot him in the back. Congress reacted to his murder, many deputies were arrested and Congress was dissolved.

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bestowed a medal of honor in his name to prominent citizens for outstanding service to their country or humanity.

How can we understand a 50-year-old man in the prime of life, an eminent physician graduated from the Sorbonne of Paris, a father, with no economic problems, loved and admired by many, a member of an old Comitán family, and only two weeks after inheriting his Senate seat making such a drastic decision?

The answer is to be found precisely in his hometown of Comitán de Domínguez, Chiapas. Here, moving through the rooms of his home and what is today the Belisario Domínguez House Museum, amongst furniture, surgical instruments, cards, photographs, letters, documents and newspapers, we can understand that his death was not the product of an exceptional heroic act, but the logical outcome of a life dedicated to effectively serving his neighbors, fighting against injustice on all levels and fulfilling his duty above all things.

Let us look at the pharmacy at the entrance. Named La Fraternidad (Fraternity), it

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is a faithful reproduction of the one Dr. Domínguez had next to his office. Here, we discover that Belisario, doctor, surgeon and oculist, graduated in Paris in 1889, exercised his practice without class distinctions. This is important if we consider that he lived in a city where it was not well looked upon for a member of the upper classes to concern himself with someone who did not belong to his circle. Three days a week, he saw the poor, and on other occasions, he went out into the Tojolabal canyons to treat the needy. His generosity was methodical and discrete: through a slot that connected the pharmacy with the doctor's office, he passed his pharmacist the patient's prescription, including a code that only the two of them knew telling the

pharmacist how much he should charge, which was decided according to the patient's income. If the patient was very poor, the code would be "charge to my account" and both medication and office visit would be free. The doctor was also well versed in pharmacology, combining patent medicines from national and foreign suppliers with medications, oils and infusions made locally, as well as traditional herbs that brought with them the wisdom of the ancient Mayas.

The Family Room holds objects, photographs, calling and congratulatory cards in an area decorated with European furniture, rugs and curtains. All this speaks to us of a comfortable economic position, but also of a man who appreciated family life. Somewhere there is an explanation that his daughter played the piano and that he enjoyed listening to her practice whenever he could take a break from his practice. We also learn that he inherited his liberal blood from his father, Don Cleofas Domínguez Román, a merchant who fought for the Reform movement and against the French invasion.

Another plaque brings the romantic visitor some history, briefly describing his first meeting with the woman who was to become his wife, a description which also reflects the social milieu in which they moved. Domínguez had been given a hero's welcome on his return from Paris. Being single, with a degree in medicine, from a respectable family and prosperous economically made him the best catch in Comitán. A big reception was organized to which the young ladies from the best families were all invited. They spent weeks preparing their best gowns for the event, dresses made of imported fabrics, perfect make-up and accessories. They all hoped to capture his heart with their looks. After greeting innumerable young ladies, Belisario went up to the one who was the most discretely dressed and who had the least anxious smile, Delfina Zebadúa, and told her how beautiful he thought she was. One year later they were married and in the next ten years they would have four children. Their marriage lasted less than 14 years because Doña Delfina would die in 1903 after a long



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illness through which her husband could do nothing for her. Not long before, Belisario had lost his mother and father.

The next exhibition room is his bedroom, kept just as it was in the time he was a bachelor and then a widow. His clothing and accessories, including a scarf pin, cane, top hat and cufflinks, testify to his impeccable attire.

The Doctor's Office invites the visitor to ponder the state of medical technology at the time. Apparatuses and instruments imported from the United States were at the cutting edge of Belisario's time. A still is also on display, designed by the doctor himself, that he used in preparing medications, as well as suitcases, books and his work desk.

The rooms entitled Historic Framework and the Senate follow him in his incursions into politics. They include copies of his "Chiapas, Letter to *Porfirista* Gentlemen of Mexico City" and the newspaper *El Vate*, in which he not only denounced the state of poverty and neglect Chiapas suffered from, but also demanded that state and federal officials intervene to correct it. These were published in Mexico City between 1903 and 1905, where he lived for a time after the death of his wife. Another interesting piece is the letter in which he defended the Comitán Civic Hospital from the governor's greed, and another in which he challenged a San Cristóbal local strongman to a duel after the latter proposed he join a political uprising. Domínguez wanted to avoid bloodshed in his state and proposed a duel to the death as a way of deciding the matter. He never received an answer.

Many other documents also summarize the tragic events of the revolutionary struggle from the time of the death of Madero up until his own disappearance and assassination, as well as the dissolution of Congress. One particularly interesting piece is the only newspaper that reported his assassination.

The Speech Room is papered with the full text of the speech that cost him his life and



that few people have actually read. By now, we have gathered just enough information to understand that, more than an act of heroism, his words were a demonstration of consistency. The Documents Room summarizes on paper Don Belisario's social, family and civic life. A Multi-purpose Room and Specialized Library complete the tour of the museum's rooms.

Finally, the garden awaits us, replete with all manner of flowers and plants, particularly the doctor's favorites. Several benches and a hospitable silence are the epilogue of this voyage of discovery. A moment of reflection may well offer us one last lesson: life is not worth much if it is to be lived gagged and dominated by the fear of the violence of those in power. ■■■

Elsie Montiel
Editor

CASA MUSEO DOCTOR BELISARIO DOMÍNGUEZ
AVE. DR. BELISARIO DOMÍNGUEZ 35
COMITÁN, CHIAPAS C.P. 30000
PHONE: (963) 632-1300
OPEN TUESDAY TO SATURDAY FROM 10 A.M. TO 6:45 P.M.
AND SUNDAY FROM 9 A.M. TO 12:45 P.M.

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