But then there was Che... A personal perspective

Friday, 13 June 2008
Last Updated Sunday, 15 June 2008

by Dayan Jayatilleka The Argentine was already dead when I was introduced to him. I was not quite eleven. My father walked into the guest room of my aunt and uncle’s "bungalow" at the University of Peradeniya, where we were on holiday, and tossed The Ceylon Observer onto my bed, where I was still in my flannel pyjamas. The paper was opened to the full page article my father had written on the man after his death; a large black and white photograph in the middle, not the iconic one by Korda but I still remember it, the eyes, the cocky half-smile, the beard and the beret.
I read the article as I did almost all my father’s, except for some I would miss during my years underground, discovering a two part piece which appeared in the edit page of The International Herald Tribune somewhere in 1985, many years later. Literary critic turned political commentator, Mervyn had chosen the dead man’s letters as the window into his individuality and temper, noting the irreverence of the eternal rebel. What entered my mind most powerfully though was the famous concluding passage the article reproduced from the Message to the Tricontinental, which I could recite by memory like a prayer before I entered my teens, and would make a nuisance of myself inscribing in any proffered autograph album at St. Joseph’s: "wherever death may surprise us let it be welcome, so long as our battle cry reach some receptive ear, and other hands come forward to pick up our weapons and other men come forward to intone our funeral dirge with the staccato chant of the machine gun, and new cries of battle and victory". I know there are other translations, but this is the first one I read and it is the one I still recall. Months later I would encounter him again, the dead Argentinean-Cuban-Latin American-Third Worldist-internationalist, this time in Europe, during the "events" of 1968. I was with my parents – my father was covering the unfolding uprising - and the memory is a collage of demonstrations, television coverage of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam (the best commentary by Olivier Todd), political discussions in basements and cellars in West German cities with students of Habermas debating Marcuse, the poster of a GI in a helmet holding a bayonet to the throat of a Vietnamese prisoner, a South Vietnamese police chief shooting a prisoner in the head, the atmosphere of the walk up to the Wall, Matt Monroe singing ‘Wednesday’s Child’ from the The Quiller Memorandum playing on the US Armed Forces radio in Germany just as it did in a scene in the movie when Quiller walks into a seedy hotel, flower power in London, the Stones, Clapton with Cream, the news of Bobby Kennedy’s murder breaking while we were in a hotel in Belgrade, everyone’s tears. But always, Guevara, this time the iconic photograph of 1960 wallpapering the city streets and raised on placards, rouge et noir, with the defiant proclamation: "Che Lives!" Ernesto "Che" Guevara My father’s series on May ’68 in The Ceylon Observer commenced with the line "You see him everywhere". Forty years later, the Los Angeles Times of June 1st reports the same thing. Ben Ehrenreich writes: "And though he never went away – except in the strict mortal sense – Che is suddenly everywhere again." Once you’ve met him he never really goes away. In a full-page interview given to Kendall Hopman in The Sunday Times Colombo in November 1988, when I had just resurfaced from the underground, I recounted the essay competition run by the middle school at St. Joseph’s College, which I won, but caused my mother to be requested to pay a call on Fr Rector, Rev WLA Don Peter, the noted Catholic educationist and writer. The open essay topic was ‘The person who has influenced me most’, and I had chosen Che. An only child who lived down Ward Place, schooled at a non-state Catholic college, dined out more often than he dined in, saw every movie that hit town (sneaking with paternal assistance into adults only ones), travelled overseas extensively, performed well at exams, was deemed totally "Westernized" if not "Americanized", should predictably have wound up elsewhere, living differently -- not being questioned at the Intelligence Services Division headquarters in Longden Place as a teenager who had just left high school; or dropping out of a Fulbright scholarship; or turning thirty unable to use his own name, the first accused indicted on 13 counts starting with conspiracy to overthrow the State through violence, on the run from the National Intelligence Bureau and the Pol Potist JVP which had just slit the throat of a radical student; or sleeping lightly in a building near the Batticaloa lake sharing a room with EPRLF founder Pathmanabha, AKs by the bedside, handguns by our pillows because the LTTE had just attacked an IPKF "picket" close by. They are dead now, many of those who were there that night, killed over the years by the Tamil Tigers: Kirubhakaran the Corpulent, Razik bare bodied and in a sarong, ammunition belt slung around his torso, assault rifle across the chair arms, Pathmanabha who had trained (like Douglas Devananda) with the Palestinians in Lebanon and had as a prized souvenir a powder blue cashmere turtleneck gifted by Dr George Habash. But then there was Che. In my teens I secured every book on Che that I knew of written in the English language, from Andrew Sinclair’s slender Fontana Modern Masters volume in 1970 through Venceremos edited by John Gerassi which I picked up in London in 1973 (together with a picture postcard of Rene Burri’s photograph of Che, head cocked, smiling, smoking a cigar) while EROS founder E Ratnasabapathy bought me Althusser’s For Marx. The authentic absorption of Che’s influence precludes the safe, salon radicalism practiced in Colombo or London. In his words "some may call me an adventurer. I am, but with a difference - one who risks his skin to prove his platitudes". That is why the only thing I chose from Harvard in the USA’s Bicentennial year, 1976, during a visit intended as an inducement by my parents, worried sick about my affiliation with an armed radical group, Mitipahara (Hammer Blow) and resultant questioning by the intelligence services division, was a copy from the bookstore of Big Flame, the mimeographed journal of the Weather Underground. Che’s "Dear Folks" farewell letter to his parents, in which he identifies with Don Quixote, and Bob Dylan’s A Hard Rain’s a Gonna Fall (Pete Seeger’s Carnegie hall version of which I heard at Comrade Pieter Keuneman’s penthouse), were the reasons why, an only child, I could be a perpetually Prodigal Son, leaving my parents for full time activism not knowing when I would see them (or they, me) again, and having survived one experience, engage again and again in risk taking political projects and take stances, tilting at windmills. H.E Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the UN Geneva Che had much to do with what I was attempting with the EPRLF’s Pathmanabha, a Jaffna Tamil, and

he with me, a Colombo Sinhalese. When, having read my articles, he came to meet me, an undergraduate, at Peradeniya university in the late ’70s (Suresh Premachandran with him once), he had not yet left EROS/GUES to found the EPRLF as he would in 1981. He had run into Martin Walker of The Guardian, a friend of my father’s, in Beirut. We talked sadly of the siege of Tel Al Zataar, the Palestinian refugee camp. His party paper Progressive Voice featured Che Guevara and Stalin. Che was special to us; we had that in common. Lenin had provided the theory, but Che provided the example, the praxis of internationalist commitment and engagement. Pathmanabha would call our parallel and joint project "Total revolution". Devananda, now a Minister, former leader of the EPRLF’s military wing the PLA, still escaping death and absorbing the violent deaths of those close to him, is of the same lineage, though the times and thus the tasks, are different. October 1987, Che’s twentieth death anniversary was coming up and only the street lights provided illumination as Vijaya Kumaratunga and I talked low-voiced in an empty house rented in his sister’s name, where he had given me shelter when we had begun to run out of safe houses. The place was bare, not even the electricity had been connected, but it was better than my earlier hiding place, a scorched, leaky shed among dwellings burnt in July ’83, with a Petromax lamp for lighting. Chandrika would tell me later in Oslo in 1990 how she found the "thank you" note I had sent Vijaya through Qadri Ismail and Sivaram (‘Taraki’) when I abruptly moved. Vijaya had kept it in his dairy. I never met him again – a JVP assassin emptied a full banana clip into his chest and face in February 1988. I was in another country under another name. Vijaya and I had been acquainted with each other for a few years, I had praised him in prominent print, but we got close on a visit to Moscow in 1985 for the World Festival of Youth and Students. That night two years later, in late 1987, Vijaya and I had talked about Che, three of whose portraits Vijaya had. He promised to issue a statement on the 20th death anniversary and illustrate it with a photograph of himself with a portrait of Che in the background. Che’s death anniversary and Vijaya’s birthday (now birth anniversary) were only a day apart. I told our student cadres to watch out for it and carry it in their newspaper. They never expected it because Vijaya was thought to be not quite the sort who would identify with Che. The photo was discovered after he was killed, and was reproduced in the Colombo university student paper. On his first death anniversary I turned it into a poster: Vijaya at his desk, and Che Guevara - Alma Guillermoprieto’s perfectly described "harsh angel" - looking over his shoulder. (Ralex Ranasinghe did the graphics. Chandrika had one in her flat in London.) Whether it was the decision to return to Sri Lanka from the Maldives despite the warning from Kethesh Loganathan (shot two years ago by the Tigers) and Joe Seneviratne that the crackdown had started in Sri Lanka, or the one not to take the ticket to WIDER, Finland, kindly kept for me at the UNDP office by Dr Lal Jayewardene at his own initiative and insistence, or the one to go underground leaving everything behind not knowing when and if one would be back in "the world", or to scorn the option of some who surrendered themselves at the most convenient police station and settled comfortably under house arrest, or to return to Sri Lanka and help President Premadasa - whom I saw as the equivalent of Peron or Allende - passing up the Foreign and Commonwealth Office scholarship to Cambridge or the LSE (Prof Fred Halliday had already agreed to have me as his student; Chandrika Bandaranaike and Prof Amal Jayawardene were waiting for me as I exited his office), the trace elements of Che in the consciousness were responsible. A just cause does not need prolonged argument to enlist in, nor does an unjust one need prolonged persuasion to be combated. On August 10th, 1992, stripped nearly naked except for torn underpants, head gashed and bleeding from being beaten by a lynch mob looking for knife to finish the job (aptly enough at the cemetery), angered by my open support of the besieged Premadasa who had been accused in a grotesque falsehood of murdering his own general, a war hero, a thought that insinuated itself into my head was "Surely life was not destined to end before I could commemorate the 25th death anniversary of Che?" That October my "Meditation on Che" appeared in a special issue of The Economic Review (Colombo) accompanying a photo gallery. Diplomacy & International Policy Stephen Soderbergh’s movie starts with Che’s visit to New York in December 1964 and depicts almost his entire speech to the UN General Assembly. At the time Cuba had been ejected from the OAS, the Organization of American States. Che’s notion of diplomacy, as of everything else, is for me a model worth study: "Cuba comes here to state its position on the most important points of controversy and will do so with the full sense of responsibility that the use of this rostrum implies, while at the same time fulfilling the unavoidable duty of speaking clearly and frankly…We feel that we have the right and the obligation to do so, because our country is one of the most constant points of friction. It is one of the places where the principles upholding the right of small countries to sovereignty are put to the test day by day, minute by minute…To the ambiguous language with which some delegates have described the case of Cuba and the OAS, we reply with clear-cut words…" In speeches from Havana to Algiers, from Punta del Este to New York, Che, internationalism incarnate, drew a line in the sand on national independence and "the principles upholding the right of small countries to sovereignty". In his famous speech of 1961 in Uruguay he declared: "…It is a revolution that has reaffirmed national sovereignty and that, for the first time, has called in its own name and in the name of all the peoples of the Americas and of the world for the return of all territories unjustly occupied by foreign powers… And every time that an imperialist power subjugates a territory, it is a blow against every inhabitant of that territory. That is why we struggle for the independence of other countries, for the independence of the occupied territories, indiscriminately, without asking about the political regime or about the aspirations of those who fight for their independence."[Emphasis mine: DJ] To those pseudo progressives, contemporary Kautskys, who insist on UN monitoring of Sri Lanka -- another name for establishing an imperialist (political) base and network -- or advocate R2P camouflaged intervention (which Jean Bricmont, professor of Theoretical Physics at the University of Louvain, denounces as ‘Humanitarian Imperialism’ in his recent Monthly Review book), one may reply with the words of Che at the UN rostrum: "How can we forget the betrayal of the hope that Patrice Lumumba placed in the United Nations? How can we forget the machinations and manoeuvres that followed in the wake of the occupation of that country by United Nations troops, under whose auspices the assassins of this great African patriot acted with impunity? How can we forget, distinguished delegates, that the one who flouted the authority of the UN in the Congo - and not exactly for patriotic

reasons, but rather by virtue of conflicts between imperialists - was Moise Tshombe, who initiated the secession of Katanga with Belgian support? And how can one justify, how can one explain, that at the end of all the United Nations activities there, Tshombe, dislodged from Katanga, should return as lord and master of the Congo? Who can deny the sad role that the imperialists compelled the United Nations to play?" "…there must clearly be established the obligation of all states to respect the present frontiers of other states … we feel it necessary to stress, furthermore, that the territorial integrity of nations must be respected and the armed hand of imperialism held back…" Che arrived in Sri Lanka, then Ceylon in 1959, the very year of the Cuban revolution’s triumph, on a long swing that would take him to India, China and Japan. (Mervyn told me about the press conference and Che’s ironic wit). Revolutionary Cuba’s first year would be the last year of SWRD Bandaranaike, soon to be murdered by a monk. Just a few years before, Ceylon under the UNP government of Sir John Kotelawela had opposed the invitation of China to the Bandung conference. Had that government remained in office, a visit by Che would have been unthinkable. That visit dramatically expresses the difference in the character of the two administrations and the unambiguously progressive external aspect of the complex changes of 1956. Anyone who has read Che knows how much he abhorred the reactionary secessionist strivings in Africa and fought against them. Given the anti-Franco, antifascist sentiments of his family, which constituted the political medium in which he grew up, there can be no doubt as to where he would have been had his country faced the challenge of an armed fascist movement. Given his commitment to the Non Aligned Movement, his reaching out to Nasser and other Afro-Asian leaders, his appreciation of Allende and late developing sympathy for Peronism, I have no doubt as to the sympathy with which he would have viewed a patriotic populist President in South Asia, fighting to keep his small country from dismemberment while not caving in to neo-colonial pressure and interference. Given Che’s dictum that when a government has come into being by a vote whether fraudulent or not, the guerrilla outbreak cannot be promoted (Guerrilla Warfare, Chapter 1.1) I have no doubt that Prabhakaran’s war against a democracy, especially after the Indo-Lanka Accord reforms of 1987, is unnecessary and therefore unjust, as was the JVP’s continuation of its second insurrection after President Premadasa was elected. Given Che’s clarity that after a certain point and against a certain kind of enemy, armed violence has to be the major axis of effort, I have no doubt that warfare is necessary to combat the LTTE (just as it was with the JVP in 1987-90). Given Fidel’s confirmation to Ignacio Ramonet, in his definitive biography/"spoken autobiography", that Che (who in 1960 laid a wreath at Stalin’s tomb, against the advice of the Cuban Ambassador) was more pro-Stalin and less critical than he himself was, I have no doubt as to Che’s steely tough-mindedness. However, given Che’s insistence on clean, pure, knightly ethics in warfare, an ethic he partly derived from and partly evolved in conjunction with Fidel -- and always practiced, as did the Cuban armed forces, uniquely -- I am always conscious of the moral erosion caused and the ethical dilemmas posed by the needless cruelties of the Sri Lankan conflict. Here, Now Che’s discussions with President Kennedy’s young advisor Richard Goodwin and his CBS interview given to Lisa Howard tell me that he, like Fidel and Raul, would have been open to the potentials of Barack Obama and the possibilities of a principled dialogue. In New York, Che stayed at the Cuban embassy building which housed the apartment of a young Cuban diplomat Miguel Alfonso Martinez, and "fell in love" with his two year old daughter, as Miguel, Merlin-like and pony-tailed, told me over dinner in Geneva some weeks ago. Miguel worked and interacted with Che during that fortnight in New York. A professor, he has trained generations of first-rate Cuban diplomats at Havana’s prestigious Higher Institute for International Relations. Having read my book on Fidel and essay on Che published in the Granma online in English and Spanish last November for the 40th anniversary of Che’s death, he paid me probably the highest compliments of my life. If I had to write that schoolboy essay all over again, the one about the person who has most influenced my life, it may, on balance, still be Che, when judged in the Sartrean sense by choices, actions, decisions - but the identification of subject would not come quite so easy, because viewed over half a century of lived life, I can see more clearly now that Che’s influence was situated on a foundation constituted by another presence, preparatory and perfectly compatible, as Castro and Chavez confirm. That presence will in the final analysis prove more elusive and intricate yet abiding an existential hero than Che. Choices are not only things you do, but also those which you choose not to, such as renunciation of certain beliefs and loyalties, identifications and figures in exchange for a larger national role. In the beginning was the word. My father introduced me to one lasting influence, Che; my mother to the other whose name in childish abbreviation had been the first word I had spoken, not the names for "father" or "mother". Eighty years after his birth they are making movies and music about the Argentinean. Two thousand years after his, they are making movies and music about the Nazarene. Che at eighty remains for me, at fifty-one, the man he was in his thirties, the model of a rebel and hero, and the highest form of expression of a human being in our time: intellectually brilliant, courageous, undaunted, rebellious, sensitive, humorous, irreverent, ironic, frank, dedicated, determined, self-disciplined, ethical, humane, humanitarian, internationalist, intransigent, unorthodox and visionary. If, as Fidel and the late Manuel Pineiro would have it, Che is the "paradigm" of the revolutionary and liberation fighter, then Pol Pot, Prabhakaran, Osama Bin Laden and Wijeweera are antitheses, negations, standing in the same relation to Che as Barabbas to Christ. Che was born in June, 1928. My father, born a year later, died in June, 1999. Che is still with me now, here in this room in the old ambassadorial residence in Geneva badly in need of repair and refurbishing, the new, fuller editions of Guerrilla Warfare, Reminiscences and The Bolivian Diary in the glass bookcase. His visage is on the wall as I look around me, the photographs of my parents and myself as a kid, my father and I at the poolside in Cairo during the Second Non Aligned summit (a meeting mentioned four times by Che in his New York speech) pausing to look up at the camera while reading books, my paternal grandfather’s 1913 Cambridge Junior certificate (signed by MR James the Vice Chancellor) from Trinity College, Kandy, the picture of the Buddha gifted by my wife Sanja’s non-traditionalist Buddhist teacher, wedding portraits of Sanja and me in Brisbane, a Sri Lankan crafted head of Jesus wearing the crown of thorns. Che is on the wall over my computer and it is him I see when I look up from my work. It is an unusual portrait, gifted to me at the former Cuban ambassador’s residence in Colombo (as a schoolgirl on

exchange in Hanoi, Yvonne Suarez Roche had translated for Ho Chi Minh) by a representative of Cuba’s Institute of Friendship among the Peoples (ICAP). I’ve never seen another like it: this is not based on Korda’s immortalised photo but a similar one at a different inclination, which by the strange symmetry I have often experienced with Che, was on the cover of my first copy, bought in 1971, of Guerrilla Warfare, the Penguin Latin American Library paperback edition. The art is modernist, psychedelic, with Che’s face, his eyes, the whole depiction as he was in life and afterlife: projected into the future; determined, arresting, illumined, ablaze. (Courtesy : The Island)