



Testimony Silvia Henao - Transcription of the Video Interview

English Version:

1. Migration biography overview:

I came to Belgium 30 years ago, pregnant with my second child, who was born in October 1981. Living in Belgium, this is already my fourth country, but I was born in Bogotá, Colombia. And then at the age of 15 I travelled to the United States and I did my education there because I had not finished my elementary studies in Colombia. So, I did high school and university in the United States. Then I traveled to Spain in 1972 and I came to Belgium in 1974 for a visit to take part in the folk-dance festival in Schoten. Then I met my ex-husband, who is from Antwerp. He travelled to Ecuador and I joined him there. And then we lived there until I came here in 1981. I lived in Ecuador for nearly four years, in Spain for five, and in the United States for eleven years. After Ecuador I came to Belgium to live here with two children already.

2. Childhood, Family and Decision to move to the US:

The circumstances were a little bit difficult. I don't know how to say it. I was born out of wedlock. My mother wasn't married, and my biological father didn't want to know anything about me. So, I always lived with aunts and uncles, and I've always lived everywhere. When I was thirteen an American family met me because I worked in their house and they wanted to take me to the United States to help them with work. But I couldn't leave. I was too young. But they allowed me to leave two years later, when I was fifteen. So, I went on my own to live with this family. I spoke very little English, and I did my high school and university in the United States. I don't know, at that time I felt that I was not a wanted child. So, if they didn't want me, I would be very happy to leave. It wasn't like that because my mother suffered a lot after that, when I left. But my perspective was "I want out of here. Anything is better than what I have here". I just felt that I would have more opportunities to do other things rather than just being there for my family in which not everyone wanted me. I had two aunts that really cared for me, and in fact they were the ones that helped me to leave. They hated to see me leave, but at the same time they were happy because I would create a new and different life.

3. Mobility, Identity and Self-Construction:

I chose to leave the States because I fell in love with a Spaniard. So, I came to Madrid. And in Madrid I rediscovered my own language in an entirely different setting. It was very nice. It's a period of my life that I remember as a period of consolidation, emotionally and intellectually. People always asked me where I was from and how old I was. I always said, "I was born in Colombia, and I am from where I leave my suitcases". I always wanted to keep my belongings in two suitcases. I never contemplated buying a house or settling down. I was always on the move. But one thing I was sure of: I wasn't going to return to the States. I stayed in Spain, and then I had to leave five years later. Then I went to Quito, Ecuador.



Funded by
the European Union

I got married there, and then we had to leave again to come here to Belgium. And it seemed like a logical move, because then my children would have a family.

4. Motherhood, Work and Reframing Migration:

Having had children made a big change in my way of thinking and focusing. I think my children helped me to land. I had to learn to think, not in terms of myself, but in terms of what the children needed. If you leave for another country, people think that you're going to a much better place, a land of milk and honey. You go and shake the tree, and you collect what falls from the tree. And that is not the case. So, I think these people still look at Europe as the land of possibilities and everything, but you can create your possibilities everywhere. When you leave your country, as I say, exile is forever. And when I was working at the international school, people had no roots but had wings. And all these are beautiful words, but you have to sort out your own history, your own life experience. I still don't know, I have a huge question mark in front of me. My mother came to see me in 1986, and she was very surprised that I didn't have a butler serving things, and that when we opened the door she didn't sink into the carpet. And that I had to sweat and run and clean and teach and work. And she said, "I would never be able to do what you have to do, to fight two fronts, the professional front and the family front". And my mother never really had any schooling. I think she may have had three years of schooling in Latin America. And there I was, with a university degree, feeling totally inadequate in front of practical situations. Migration has always taken place throughout Europe, and we forget that history. We haven't got memory of that history, that within Europe people migrated. And that what we do is an act of "mestizaje", a mixture, a blending of, not only racially but ethnically. And look at the way language has developed and changed. That's probably at the core of our existence. I mean, we are all migrants.

5. Migration Struggles:

We were talking about it the other day, migration as a luxury rather than a need. Well, there's a need, a personal need, a fulfilment, not the economic need. When I was 15 or so, I really had pain because the life that I encountered was totally different to the life that I had expected. And in the process of meshing and putting things together, it was very painful, and I didn't feel understood. I don't know if I had depression. People would say "I'm sorry, I cannot help". So that was hard, but now homesickness doesn't seem to play a role. I remember I used to record tapes to send to my mother. And once, she said she felt that I was suffering too much because my tone of voice conveyed that I was really unhappy, that I was lonely. And possibly, because Belgium to me has been the iron test. I came here in my thirties, not knowing the language, and not being appreciated in my family circle, and having to do a lot on my own. So, I always felt that I had to struggle a lot, more than I should have had to. Here I am, telling the tale. One survives it all.

This interview was conducted by Red Star Line Museum. The women work migration platform was developed as part of the project FeMig.Lab, coordinated by Minor Kontor, in cooperation with the Humanity in Action Poland, the Ethnographic Museum of Istria, the LVR Industrial Museums and the Centrum voor de Geschiedenis van Migranten.