

Introduction to This Edition

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Known as “Minou,” Minerva Josefina Tavárez Mirabal (b. 1956) is an important political leader in the Dominican Republic. Aside from her background as a university professor and philologist, she has served as undersecretary of foreign relations (1996–2000), congresswoman (2002–2016), founder of the political party Opción Democrática, and vice president of the political party Alianza País. She served as president of Parliamentarians for Global Action and recently joined the Board of Directors of the Trust Fund for Victims at the International Criminal Court. She staunchly advocates for greater democracy, a reining in of clientelism and corruption, and an end to impunity for those who have violated human rights.

She is also internationally known as the daughter of Minerva Mirabal (1926–1960) and Manolo Tavárez (1931–1963), martyred national heroes who were taken from Minou and her brother when they were young children. Minou was three years old in 1960 when her parents, aunt, and uncles were imprisoned and tortured for their leadership in an underground resistance movement against the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo Molina (1891–1961). Later that year, her mother, two aunts, and their driver were brutally murdered in what Trujillo’s henchmen tried to pass off as an accident. Minou was only seven when her father was executed for his militant opposition to the leadership of the Triumvirate installed by the 1963 military coup. But as she reaffirms in this journey through her parents’ personal correspondence, she was there. She was shaped by her parents and the lives they shared together, and she, in turn, formed part of their now legendary lives.

In her foreword to *Mañana te escribiré otra vez*, former Chilean president and internationally known human rights advocate Michelle Bachelet captures

the significance of this book: Dominican lawyers and revolutionaries Minerva Mirabal and Manolo Tavárez are “heroes of Latin American dimensions” who continue to inspire many in the struggle for democracy and social justice. One need only visit the Memorial Museum of Dominican Resistance in Santo Domingo to appreciate their transcendence as national icons who represent the courage and sacrifice of the thousands of Dominicans who actively opposed Trujillo’s dictatorship over three decades (1930–1961). Their story resonates with people across the region and across the world precisely because it reflects the experiences of so many. Still, until now, much of their story has been silenced, victim of the regime that took their lives, but also of their mythification in the popular imaginary. This mythification and martyrization obscures their complexity and fullness as individuals, as well as the life experiences they had in common with many of us. It blurs our understanding of their activism and its legacy. In this volume, their letters and their daughter’s memories bring them back in their fullness and challenge us to see that they were like us in many ways. They challenge us to ask where the injustices are in our own lives and where we might find the courage to oppose them.

In this book, Minou Tavárez Mirabal, who continues her parents’ struggle for democracy, shares their intimate correspondence and guides us on a journey into life under the repressive Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. The memoir with which she frames her parents’ 117 letters and telegrams from 1954 to 1963 illustrates the complexity of memory woven around silences and unanswered questions. These questions are the fractures left in the aftermath of a repressive authoritarian regime that has parallels throughout Latin America. In this way, the story of the Tavárez Mirabal family is germane to broader conversations about trauma, healing and memory in post-dictatorial societies. Most significantly, it is the gripping, universally human story of a family that finds strength, courage and life in the ties that unite them. It invites us to reflect upon the essential, life-giving role of interpersonal relationships in the face of seemingly unbearable terror. By revealing Minerva and Manolo as flesh-and-blood human beings with faults, shortcomings and fears, the personal letters and memoir in this volume make their courage more accessible to readers who may be asking how one manages to resist in the midst of suffocating repression.

MINERVA MIRABAL AND MANOLO TAVÁREZ

Dominican-American novelist Julia Álvarez introduced Minerva Mirabal and her three sisters, Patria, Dedé, and María Teresa, to a broad English-speaking public with her 1994 novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*. The novel has inspired book club readings across the country, appears on course syllabi from middle school through college, and was the basis for Mariano Barroso's 2001 film and Caridad Svich's 2011 theatrical adaptation with the same title. The word "Butterflies" / "*Mariposas*" refers to the sisters' codenames in the underground. (Minerva was *Mariposa 1*.) While they have raised awareness about the Mirabal sisters and have captured the public's imagination about "the Butterflies," the novel and its adaptations, along with other literary works such as Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat* / *La fiesta del chivo* (2000) and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) have helped form the myth surrounding Minerva's persona, while overlooking Manolo's integral role as her partner in all things.¹ In fact, the English-language bibliography on Manolo Tavárez is scant. As Minou argues, in order to understand her parents and their activism, it is essential to understand how deeply connected they were to each other on many levels: emotionally, intellectually, philosophically, and politically. Their personal correspondence reveals these deep bonds.

But who were they? Who was the Minerva behind the image of the "Butterfly," the "Mami" who is etched in Minou's memory? Who was the person whose idealized image appears in murals, busts and on national currency? Who was Manolo, "Papi," that strong, reassuring presence who, after Minerva's death, kept her memory alive through bedtime stories and songs? Who was the husband and father behind the charismatic revolutionary, whose words, leadership, and activism form part of the Dominican historical narrative?

María Argentina Minerva Mirabal Reyes de Tavárez was born on March 13, 1926, in Ojo de Agua to Enrique Mirabal Fernández and Mercedes (Chea) Reyes Camilo. Her father was a merchant, and the family owned agricultural land. Her primary education began at the community's rural school. Beginning in the fourth grade, she attended Immaculate Conception, a private

1 These are the primary works in English. Films include Cecilia Domeyko's documentary *Code Name: Butterflies*, Accent Media, 2008, and Juan Delancer's feature film *Trópico de sangre*, Maya Entertainment, 2010. The Spanish-language bibliography on the Mirabal sisters is much more extensive.

boarding school in La Vega. She would graduate with a diploma in philosophy and letters in 1946. It was during these years that she developed the political awareness that cemented her opposition to the dictatorship, largely through friendships with members of a clandestine opposition movement called the Juventud Democrática (Democratic Youth). Minou tells us that from an early age, her mother “stood out for her intelligence, curiosity, social awareness, rebellious nature, and her deep love of reading and studying.”² Minerva’s sister Dedé describes her in her 2009 memoir *Vivas en su jardín. La verdadera historia de las hermanas Mirabal y su lucha por la libertad* (*Alive in Their Garden: The True Story of the Mirabal Sisters and Their Struggle for Freedom*). She writes that their father, Enrique Mirabal, “who knew well and feared [Minerva’s] ideas,” forced her to suspend her studies and come home between 1944 and 1945, when the Democratic Youth was being formed.³ (Minerva would graduate in 1946.) During that time, Minerva frequented a bookstore in the nearby town of San Francisco de Macorís whose owner was known to be in opposition to Trujillo, and she obtained a wide variety of books and other literature from friends including Violeta Martínez and Brunilda Soñé. She exchanged ideas with them and other friends who were involved in the Democratic Youth.⁴ Soñé, Minerva’s schoolmate, led a branch of that group in La Vega. Biographer William Galván relates that she brought back political literature from her frequent trips to the capital and shared it with Minerva. Through this connection, Minerva became a remote supporter of this political organization and similar ones in the capital.⁵ In 1949 anti-Trujillo activist Pericles Franco, also a member of the Democratic Youth, heard about Minerva, undoubtedly from their web of mutual acquaintances, and wanted to meet her. By several accounts, they shared a deep friendship and mutual admiration, though not as romantic as some suggest. Friend Emma Rodríguez recalls frequent conversations with Minerva and Pericles about many topics, including politics.⁶ Pericles was a known *antitrujillista* (person in opposition to Trujillo), and this friendship, along with Minerva’s frequent critical remarks about Trujillo, placed her on the regime’s watchlist. She drew increas-

2 Minou Tavárez Mirabal, *Mañana te escribiré otra vez. Minerva y Manolo. Cartas*. (Santo Domingo: Editorial Santillana, 2014), 290. My translation.

3 Dedé Mirabal, *Vivas en su jardín. La verdadera historia de las hermanas Mirabal y su lucha por la libertad*. (New York: Vintage Español, Random House, 2009), 63.

4 William Galván, *Minerva Mirabal. Historia de una heroína* (Santo Domingo: Comisión Permanente de Efemérides Patrias, 2011), 113 and 139; Mirabal, *Vivas*, 67.

5 Galván, *Minerva*, 113.

6 Mirabal, *Vivas*, 67; Galván, *Minerva*, 151–52.

ing suspicion when she resisted Trujillo's overtures to meet her personally at a series of parties between July and October, 1949. This is particularly true of her now legendary confrontation with Trujillo at a dance in San Cristóbal on October 12 of that year. This confrontation confirmed her unwavering opposition to the regime.⁷

Most popular accounts of Minerva's life suggest that her trouble with the regime began when she rejected Trujillo while dancing with him at this event. The typical narrative is that she met the dictator's sexual advances with a slap in the face and subsequently became a "political opponent" that Trujillo felt "a relentless need to humiliate."⁸ In interviews for Cecilia Domeyko's 2008 documentary *Code Name: Butterflies*, both Minou and her aunt Dedé explain that Minerva's "slap in the face" toward Trujillo was not a physical affront, but rather a verbal rejection, an assertion of her own dignity and agency.⁹ Many see Trujillo's subsequent pursuit of the Mirabal family as retaliation for this affront to his vanity and manhood. Some narratives sensationalize the episode for its sexual implications. While this public affront to his image was undoubtedly embarrassing for Trujillo, it does not explain the relentlessness with which he pursued Minerva and her family for the next eleven years. By taking a wider look at Minerva's political awakening and activism, within the broader context of anti-Trujillo resistance movements and gender norms at the time, we can more fully appreciate the threat that she posed to his regime and why the October 1949 confrontation was significant but was only part of a much larger dynamic. In short, it allows us to see Minerva's agency more clearly.

Ample evidence suggests that by October 1949, Minerva was already under surveillance for her personal associations with members of the Democratic Youth and that she had come under scrutiny on previous occasions.¹⁰ According to the accounts of several relatives and friends, her conversation with Trujillo during that dance was political. Galván relates that at one point they discussed Pericles Franco. The accounts of that conversation vary slightly regarding the specifics, but they concur that the dictator asked Minerva about her interest in politics—or perhaps his politics—to which she expressed ei-

7 Galván, *Minerva*, 133–37; 148; 151–52.

8 Nancy Robinson, "Women's Political Participation in the Dominican Republic: The Case of the Mirabal Sisters," *Caribbean Quarterly*, 52, nos. 2–1 (2006): 177.

9 *Code Name: Butterflies / Nombre secreto: Mariposas*, directed, written, and produced by Cecilia Domeyko. Accent Media (2008), minutes 21:35–22:17.

10 Galván 139, based on testimony from Minerva's friend at the time, Emma Rodríguez.

ther disinterest or disapproval. Trujillo asked what would happen if he sent his young supporters to “conquer” her, using the word *conquistar*, which has clear sexual connotations but could also mean to win her over and subjugate her politically. She reportedly responded, “And what if I conquer them?”¹¹ This was the verbal slap in the face that has become legendary and that has been recast in fictional accounts as a physical slap in the face in response to sexual advances. The significance of the confrontation in San Cristóbal was not simply that Minerva rejected Trujillo’s seductive suggestions, but that, in whatever words she used when she stopped dancing and confronted him in the middle of the dance floor, she confirmed her political opposition and demonstrated that she would not acquiesce to him. This was a time when women of diverse political inclinations had become increasingly active in politics, education, and public life, but they generally showed deference in line with patriarchal norms. Now it was clear that this intelligent, widely admired young woman from an important family in Salcedo was part of the opposition and was intent on standing her ground.

This confrontation prompted her father’s arrest two days later. He and subsequently Minerva were accused of plotting against the regime. Enrique Mirabal would never fully recover from the injuries sustained while in prison and would die less than three years later at their home in Ojo de Agua. During the search of the Mirabal home, authorities found at least one letter from Pericles Franco. They arrested Minerva, Violeta Martínez, Emma Rodríguez, and Brunilda Soñé. All were interrogated separately at Fortaleza Ozuma in the capital and were asked about Minerva, her relationship with Pericles, and her reported displays of anti-Trujillo sentiment, such as refusing to toast to his health.¹² Minou tells us that Minerva refused to meet with Trujillo or to write him a letter of apology for the October 12 incident.¹³ Minerva was placed under house arrest. She was later detained at a hotel in the capital, since women were not typically imprisoned for political reasons during that time. Her mother insisted on accompanying her. She and her parents were detained again in 1951 for a period of some weeks.

William Galván recounts that Pericles had written to Minerva from exile, asking her to join him, but that she refused to receive the letter out of

11 See Mirabal, *Vivas*, 99–101; Galván, *Minerva*, 147–48; Rafael Taveras, “Entrevista con Rafael (Fafa) Taveras, Comunicador,” *El día*. YouTube. Nov. 23, 2018. www.youtube.com/watch?v=4JgUzNtSMYg.

12 Galván, *Minerva*, 150–151.

13 Tavárez Mirabal, *Mañana*, 291.