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Comments on the book:

*This was Elsa* (“Así era Elsa”)

By Bertha de León, Lima, Editorial El Principito, Lima, 2012

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Peruvian-North American Cultural Institute (ICPNA)

- I want to thank Bertha de León for writing this beautiful and generous book, and through her all friends and companions of Elsa who contributed so much to her full and pleasant life.
- My thanks also to all of you who are present here to celebrate my mother’s life, who would have been 92 years old on May 8, 2013. Thanks also to the ICPNA, institution that Elsa supported continuously in her newspaper columns and articles.
- To see how other people remember and appreciate someone as close as a mother produces a strange but interesting and pleasant emotion. It helps to place things in perspective, confirms perceptions and adds new facets to the image one has of a loved person.
- As we advance in life, and once we cross the barriers of 50, 60 and 70 years, we begin to realize how much we have of our parents within us. This is puzzling, partly because it is uncomfortable to become aware that when young we fought against what we are now.
- Bertha’s chronicles are accurate and fun. They portray Elsa’s way of being and her unusual combination of inveterate prankster, ironic and sarcastic writer, tender and kind woman, and her unflinching ethical and moral sense. They also highlight her strong common sense (she liked to say, quoting Voltaire, “common sense is the least common of the senses”), and her practical way of solving problems.
- What Bertha has written give several examples: “Sir, you dropped this” shows how to instill a sense of responsibility in others by feigning naiveté; “Elastic” tells how it is possible to face embarrassing situations in a natural way; “Mammy, the milk arrived” is about a jingle that Elsa composed and sold to a dairy company; and “Cooking contest” tells how she won a price in the US for her recipe to cook chicken. These anecdotes remind us how Elsa did many different things, using always her creativity and marvelous common sense.
- I would like to add a couple of additional facets to those told by Bertha. One is that of improvisation comedienne. She loved to attend improvisation comedy shows, and once went to see the director in one of the theaters to suggest a small act. Elsa proposed to perform the role of a senior citizen (old hag, would say she!) that stands in the audience and complains loudly that all comedians

are young. Whoever is on stage tries to silence her, but after she continues protesting, he or she ends inviting Elsa to the stage. She settles up there and start to tell, with feigned surprise and innocence, how everything is harder with age: newspapers are printed with smaller and blurred letters, architects design and build steeper stairways, people speak in a lower voice and begin to mumble, and public bathrooms are placed further and further from where you are. She repeated this act many times to cheers and a lot of applause.

- Let me know refer now to some of Elsa's articles, which I would like to share with you.
- The first refers to her role as "saintly advisor", as we used to call and tease her at home quoting one of her readers. In an interview for the second edition of her book *A woman speaks* ("Habla una mujer") she said:

*"In my columns I gave advice every so often. In one occasion a woman wrote telling me about her daughter in law. I answered through the paper telling her '... think carefully, you are older and with more experience than your daughter in law; you are wiser, make an effort to come to an understanding with her'. She wrote back an indignant letter: 'it is evident, Mrs. Sagasti, that no son of you has married yet, but the day will come when you will feel what a mother feels when a strange woman comes, grabs your son and takes him away with her.' I did not insist, because I realized that if she thought her daughter in law was a stranger who had come to 'grab her son' the problem had no solution.*

*"In another occasion a woman wrote to me from Piura telling me that she had terrible problems with her husband, but that she was a devout catholic and the priest had married them 'till death do us part', and would therefore never grant her husband a divorce. My advice, if I remember correctly, was: 'please, do not tempt your husband'."*

- The second refers to the reasons why she left Peru in 1970, which she told in the interview mentioned above:

*"Then came the dictatorship of Juan Velasco Alvarado. For many journalists it became necessary to choose between licking the boots of the military or to stay at the margin; I never liked licking boots, and even less those of the military."*

I had differences with my mother over this because I collaborated for several years with the military government. Without realizing, in no small part I stopped working with that government because of my mother's teachings. The article that Bertha includes at the end of her book, "Integrity", has some paragraphs I would like to quote:

*"You ask me, dear friend, if you are wrong in clinging to your ideals, if it is not better to yield a bit in your dealings with the world.*

*Yes, indeed, it is always better to yield a bit. Intransigence, which closes all doors and shuts our ears to the voices of others, ends up isolating us.*

*But always be sure that by 'yielding' you do not mean 'renouncing'.*

*The most important thing in life is to be faithful to yourself, without taking into account convenience, dubious compromises, opinions or advice.*

...

*When having to choose, when they ask you to yield a little and do some wrong just because 'in the end, it does not matter' and 'everybody does it', think of the mirror.*

*You have only one face. The same face you will have to look in the mirror the rest of your life. When facing a crossroad —any of the big and small crossroads we find every day— take always the decision that will allow you to look proudly at your face in the mirror."*

That was exactly what I did every day when I collaborated with the military government. I had been asked by the Minister of Industry, Admiral Alberto Jiménez de Lucio, to advise him in science and technology policy issues, but when he left the ministry, he was replaced by others who did not have his intellectual qualities, integrity and commitment. The situation became more and more difficult and I began to ask myself daily in front of the mirror: "If I stay one more day, could I continue on contributing to the development of science and technology in Peru? Or would I be just helping political authorities I do not respect?" When the answer was "I don't know", I tendered my resignation.

- Let me finish quoting one of my favorite articles by Elsa: "Declaration of faith":

*"I am going to make a simple declaration of faith: —I believe in the goodness of human beings.*

*It may seem naïve, almost childish.*

*But I don't care. I repeat: —I believe in the goodness of human beings.*

*You will tell me:*

*—Gee! Don't be blind. Look around you. Everywhere there is disagreement, dissention, envy, dishonesty, jealousy, bad faith, cowardice, swindles, crime.*

*But I insist:*

*—I believe in the goodness of human beings.*

*Why do I believe in it?*

*Because of my own experience.*

*It is true that I read every day in the newspapers stories about delinquents and horrible criminals.*

*But every day, I am also witness to acts of generosity, unselfishness, noblesse and love.*

...

*People talk about the bad stepmother, but do not mention the case of the young woman who married a widower and accepted his five children as her own.*

*We know about the woman who abandons her husband, but do not consider of interest that another woman selflessly takes care of a crippled husband for fifteen years, and during all that time has not been able to sleep a full night.*

*There is evil and egoism. Why deny it? But I don't care:  
—I believe in the goodness of human beings.*

- Thanks once more to Bertha and to all of you for participating in this event to remember an extraordinary woman, who was ahead of her time, and whose teachings are still valid: my mother, Elsa Hochhausler de Sagasti.