

Why I smuggled liberation theology books into Argentina

In a time of terror, the seminary needed the contraband words of Gustavo Gutiérrez.

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [February 14, 2018](#) issue
airport Spanish signs

Photo by [Alejandro Molina Fernández](#)

My life was changed one evening during my seminary days when I decided to put off writing a paper and attend a lecture instead. My decision was based on the impulse to procrastinate, but I was also aware that wine and cheese would be available at the lecture.

The speaker was Bishop Juan Čobrda from Argentina, who was speaking in the time of the “Dirty War” which brought terror to Argentina from 1976 until 1983. A military junta seized control of the government and waged a campaign against anyone believed to be affiliated with socialism, causing instability, terror, and ruin. Labor unions, artists, intellectuals, university students, and professors were all targeted. Dissidents and innocent civilians alike were arrested and vanished without a trace—a total of 30,000 *los desaparecidos*, or “the disappeared.” People of faith, both Christians and Jews, courageously tried to advocate for and rescue people, and some paid for their efforts with their lives.

Bishop Čobrda had seen numbers of his friends and colleagues vanish. His own brother was imprisoned and tortured. He was known to the government for his work in advocating for thousands of refugees, efforts that now linked him with others labeled as socialist and subversive elements. Because he had a target on his back, he eventually decided to take his family and settle in the United States in exile.

I sat captivated as Bishop Čobrda spoke with impassioned faith in the face of terror. He stood among us as a fierce steward of the mysteries of God, and I longed to know more. Afterward I approached him with some stuttering attempt at thanks, and he immediately said: *You should go to Argentina*. What? He had just left because of the danger and he was telling me that I should go there? *Yes. You should go so that you*

can experience firsthand the courage of the church. My first thought was—um, how could I do that? *No problem,* he said. *You should apply for a scholarship from Lutheran World Federation and go to seminary in Buenos Aires.*

I transferred to ISEDET (Instituto Superior Evangélico de Estudios Teológicos), an ecumenical Protestant seminary that had the only library in the country with books by Latin American liberation theologians, most of them Roman Catholic. Ironically, the Catholic seminaries functioned in lockstep with the military, which prohibited such reading material. In the year before I arrived, ISEDET was planning a meeting focused on youth and human rights, and in retaliation, the library was firebombed. Two thousand books were destroyed, but by the time I enrolled, the library had been repaired. It remained illegal to bring any of these books into the country.

My Spanish wasn't very good and it was going to be very challenging to do all of my coursework, so I decided it would help to have some books available to read in English translation. I picked about a dozen, all prohibited books. I figured the main danger would be that I'd be sent home, probably not locked up, but who knows?

Enter David Wartluft, the mild-mannered man who'd been the librarian at the Lutheran seminary in Philadelphia for 20 years. Dr. Wartluft was a humble, unassuming person but passionate about books and archives and the gospel. If you asked me to describe him, *radical* and *revolutionary* would not be words that would come to mind, but you can't judge a book by its cover . . .

I took two stacks of books to the library—one stack of liberation theology books that I wanted to smuggle in and another stack of books with size dimensions that matched those of the theology books. Wartluft used library tools to remove the covers, opening pages, and indexes of the one set, and then replace them with the covers, opening pages, and indexes of the other set. You'd never know that the incendiary voice of Gustavo Gutiérrez was inside of *Celtic Fairy Tales*. My stomach was in knots at the airport checkpoint in Buenos Aires as security personnel went through my luggage and flipped through the books. Nevertheless, thanks to Wartluft, I successfully smuggled contraband theology past the dictator's military guards.

My own time in Argentina ended 15 months later, when I came home one night to the small house I shared with two young Argentines active in human rights work. All of our possessions were strewn around the house. Neighbors told us that military

police had searched our home. I'm not sure what they were looking for, but I realized that my presence as a foreigner was bringing attention and increased risk to the women I lived with. It was time for me to return home anyway, as I felt called to ministry in my own country.

My experience in Argentina took place 35 years ago. In these days, when so many of God's children have targets on their backs and churches are too often silent, contraband theology is needed more than ever. But while international travel can transform young minds, seminarians should not have to leave the country to find examples of church witness that fire the imagination and inspire those who long to know the fierce, subversive mysteries of God.

We must make it a priority to send students to internships in communities where people continue to rise up "in fear and great joy" to defy those who've become like the guards at Jesus' tomb, soulless zombies of empire. We must find ways to invest in sending young people to places that are on the forefront of Easter witness.

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