

LUIS DÍAZ SOLER

HUMANIST OF THE YEAR 2000



Master Conference

A STUDENT BEFORE HIS DISCIPLINE

Good evening, my friends.

I am grateful for the distinction given to me by the Evaluation Board of the Puerto Rican Endowment for the Humanities, by granting me an award that, with equal or greater justice, has been earned by outstanding figures in the humanities who came before and I invited here today, not only to recognize them for their notable contributions, but also to share with them this honor for the work done.

I. A little about the person speaking to you

He was born in San Juan in the home of his maternal grandfather, and then went to live with his parents in the town of Barceloneta, where for a few years he lived in comfort. In that town, he attended his first five years of school at the Rafael Balseiro Maceira Elementary School. In sixth grade, he attended the Goyco School in Santurce, when his parents moved to the metropolitan area for financial reasons.

In seventh and eighth grades, he studied at the Rafael María de Labra School, where he earned his eighth grade diploma. Those were years of a serious depression and Puerto Rico did not escape the difficult circumstances. His father, unemployed, was helped by a brother who let him live on an abandoned farm in Vega Baja in exchange for working it. It was then that your speaker enrolled in first-year courses at the José Gualberto Padilla High School, which did not offer studies for subsequent years. That meant the young student had to transfer to Bayamón High School, where he finished his second, third and fourth years of secondary education, obtaining a diploma in 1935. He would enroll at the University of Puerto Rico. To support the costs of his studies, both in high school and in Río Piedras, he spent his free time growing vegetables and raising hens. He sold the produce to the plaza vendors in Vega Baja and sold syrup, given him by an uncle who worked in the San Vicente sugar mill, to the snow cone vendors. This income, though modest, helped the young student cover the costs of his studies.

While he studied in Bayamón and Río Piedras, he lived in the house of his grandmother in San Juan. Monday through Friday, he traveled from San Juan to Bayamón by ferry and in buses owned by the Valdés business, which provided transportation across the bay and on land. When he had to go to Río Piedras, he took the bus daily, until he finished his studies. He considered the idea of studying medicine, which required him to enroll in the Natural Sciences. But, after two years, aware that he did not have the resources to make the career possible, he transferred to the School of Arts and Sciences to study history, his second choice. In August of 1939, he earned his bachelor of arts degree from that school with a specialty in history. And now what?! With that diploma, it would not be easy to make his way in life, and although it was late, it occurred to him to go to the United States to earn a master's degree in the specialty he had chosen.

Here we are in August of 1939, without money and having decided to pursue graduate studies. One morning that month, the ambitious young man made the decision to move north.

He thought he would pursue his studies at Louisiana State University, where his father had studied chemistry. He had not applied for admission and only had his bachelors diploma and the academic file he had been given by the registrar. He had to look for money to move to the United States. The young man presented himself at the office of Eduardo Soler, who was vice president of the Royal Bank of Canada, and asked for a loan of \$600.00. He handed over the papers and said the loan would be approved if his grandmother would guarantee it. The grandmother gave her consent. He immediately bought a suitcase and went in search of passage. The only option was aboard the steamship Cuba that came from Venezuela en route to Havana. The ship arrived in San Juan in the night of August 30, 1939. Ticket in hand, he went to his home to inform his parents and give them the news that would ensure his absence for a year. The ship arrived in San Juan and set sail at 2:00 in the morning on August 31. It had not begun its journey when word was received aboard the ship that Adolph Hitler had just invaded Poland and ordered German ships to extinguish their lights and go to the port of Hamburg. World War II had begun. The Cuba, destined for Havana, would be docked there for two days to leave tourists going to the New York World Fair of 1939, and there the young Díaz Soler left the ship to take another that only cost \$11.00 and took him to Miami, a voyage of just one night. In Florida, he had to take a Greyhound bus to Baton Rouge, site of Louisiana State University, the goal of this odyssey. Immediately, the young student went to the Department of History and interviewed with the director, Dr. Walter Phichard. The bold pretension of the applicant, thinking he would be admitted just because he was the son of a former student, caused surprise. After explaining his intentions to the director, he was sent to the Graduate Studies Council and the Registrar of the institution for a consultation that was necessary because of his lack of an official document certifying his admission. He would be admitted conditioned on the approval of an academic program he would prepare. If he passed the required courses, he would be granted admission. He was the first Puerto Rican student to study for a masters in history of the United States at that university. Classes would begin on September 21. The day of enrollment arrived (\$67.50 per semester) and he took a room off campus, which he shared with a Chinese student and that only cost \$35.00 a month. The first day of classes arrived. While he waited in the assigned classroom, he was surprised that no other students appeared. After a while, the professor, Dr. Lynn M. Case, arrived and informed him that he was the only student enrolled in the class on European diplomacy from 1870 to 1914 (the origins of World War I). He was given an extensive bibliography on the topic and told that he had to be present for a test on October 12 to answer questions related to the material. If he passed, he would be admitted to the course. Fortunately, after having read the material and attended the other courses that were part of his program of study, he received the welcome notice that he had passed the exam, which Dr. Case had just graded. It was also announced that the topic of research to be developed would address Anglo-Spanish relations over Morocco, 1895-1906. The work would follow a plan that consisted of a trilogy of research relating the topic to the origins of World War I. Other students would work on French-Spanish and French-German relations. Because your servant knew English and Spanish, it made sense to pursue the assigned topic. It was also announced that the work could be presented as a masters thesis at the end of the academic year. This meant that he would have to apply research techniques that he had never had the opportunity to learn. Dr. Case and Dr. Barnhard, in his Research Methodology class, deserve credit for research processes that he still uses today. It is curious that the first chapter of the work focused on Anglo-Spanish relations during the Spanish-American War (1895-1898). That chapter was published years later in the first issue of *Revista Historia*, which was founded by your servant in 1951, along with Ricardo E. Alegría and Enrique Lugo Silva. It was printed at the Soltero press, with the enthusiastic and selfless support of a typographer who put his skill and enthusiasm into giving the journal life. It was the first history journal to see the light in those days in which the ground was being prepared for reforms at the University of Puerto Rico.

We return to the first steps at Louisiana State University. The masters thesis, *Anglo-Spanish Relations over Morocco, 1895-1906*, could not be finished by the end of the year. Your speaker had to return to Puerto Rico due to the war in Europe and the lack of funds to continue at the institution.

II. Return to the island: new research plans

The war made the military draft obligatory and he tried to find some kind of work that would provide the funds he needed, even while living in the house of his maternal grandmother in San Juan. Classified as IA by the Military Services Office, he was subject to being drafted to serve in the United States Army. But things took a different route. The Defense Department in Washington, which operated a Department of Engineering, was in charge of preparing plans and directing construction of a defense plan to protect the entrance of San Juan Bay, which could be threatened by German submarines. An office was opened in La Puntilla and the recently graduated masters student went there. In La Puntilla were stored the construction materials that would be used in the defense of the capital de Puerto Rico. A French officer, an expert in military construction, with the last name Bibeau, recruited a group of young people, including your speaker, who held the post of clerk. His mission was to maintain a file that reflected the war materials stored there. He gained the confidence of the engineer, Bibeau, who ordered him transferred to the sites chosen for defense: (Cabras Island, Escambron, Cangregos Bay), where cannons were being placed to defend the entrance to San Juan Bay, which could be targeted by German submarines in the Caribbean waters. The cannons could create a cross fire that would be difficult for the German submarines to evade. Additionally, after six o'clock in the evening a steel cable was placed under the water between the promontory of El Morro and Cabras Island as an additional security measure.

III. Unexpected transfers

During this mission, a young officer, Captain Clark, arrived in San Juan, who had also studied in Louisiana. He visited the facilities where your speaker worked and asked Bibeau to approve his transfer to the Federal Building in San Juan, where the Censorship Office, which Captain Clark would direct, was to be based. Transferred to this office with the unexpected salary of \$4,500 a year, he had to share duties with Dr. Julie Guzmán, with Emilio Huyke and with the brother of Professor Reece Bothwell. Curiously, Dr. Lynn M. Case worked in a similar post, until Germany began to lose control of the situation in Europe, which meant that government agencies that were no longer necessary were coming to an end.

Coincidentally, one morning he received a telephone call from Pilar Barbosa, then director of the Department of History, to offer him the opportunity to serve as an Interim Instructor of History, replacing Professor Antonio Rivera, who had gone to Mexico to complete his doctoral studies. She asked about his salary, and upon learning what he received from the Censorship Office, she was tempted to retract her offer, but he had already accepted the \$1,500.00 for 10 months and an appointment as interim instructor. It was an opportunity to work as a history professor and the situation required some kind of sacrifice. It was also expected that he would be called for obligatory military service as soon as he left his post at the Censorship Office, where he was exempt from the draft. The Army acted immediately, but the scarcity of professors in the UPR was such that the rector requested a deferment for six months, which was granted. The possibility of using his services during the following summer arose. Your servant was in the movie theater when it was announced that the atomic bomb had been dropped on Japan and the surrender of the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo axis was expected, putting an end to the war. Professor Rivera returned and doña Pilar has kind enough to propose your servant for the position that had been offered to another professor who had the support of the political party in power. He had to teach the History of the Americas course, which had such a high enrollment that it was offered in the General Studies

amphitheater, and the rookie instructor was obliged to prepare two sets of exams to prevent the multitudes of students from copying.

IV. A history of slavery is born

"Research was in his blood." Upon returning to the island in August of 1940, your speaker had in mind the idea of doing research about slavery. He had studied in a southern state of the United States. It seemed the institution had been different there than it had worked in Puerto Rico. While he worked for the federal government, in the war effort, he used his free time to research slavery on the island. He responsibly applied the techniques he had learned. The difference was no surprise. There, the owners prepared and rigorously applied the laws they prepared, without any intervention by the London government or the colonial assemblies. In Puerto Rico and the other Spanish colonies, slavery was governed by rules promulgated by Spain and by regulations that the Spanish government prepared in its colonies, taking into consideration the differences the environment made advisable. In the United States, the slave was a thing. In the Spanish colonies, it was a human being recognized as having the ability to reason.

It should be explained that on the island, except in the early 1530s, the slave population was small. There was never enough Spanish population on the island during Spain's four centuries of rule. This contrasted with the huge numbers of slaves on the large ranches and plantations in Brazil and Cuba. In Puerto Rico, what existed were mini plantations that completed the work with free laborers. Given the shortage of slaves, there was a need to limit violent punishment that could have deprived the owners of workers and would have led to a limitation on potential production. This circumstance forced the owners to provide the best treatment the circumstances allowed, which did not occur in the United States, nor in the Spanish colonies with huge quantities of slaves. The research I am talking about was the product of individual effort. Over the course of ten years, your speaker produced what was considered to be a pioneering work, which served as the foundation for other works on a topic that had been considered taboo. In those years – the 1940s and 50s – nobody talked about a topic that was considered ugly, or gave it any importance.

When the war ended in 1945, your speaker requested an extension to complete his masters degree and take the written and oral exams administered by the history and political science professors. Having fulfilled these requirements in August of 1947, he presented himself to receive his degree in the graduation ceremony of June, 1948. Having completed the requirements of his masters degree, he had to leave for the Library of Congress with his manuscript on the history of slavery, which he would complete using materials in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, in the libraries of the University of Chicago and Columbia University, and then, sifting through the archives of the Library of Congress.

It was at the Library of Congress that he was approached by several professors from Louisiana who wanted to know what he was doing there. Upon showing them the work that he had done in Puerto Rico and explaining the purpose of publishing it once it was finished, they insisted on recommending that the History Department accept the work that was just being finished as a doctoral dissertation. Upon his return to the University of Puerto Rico, they wrote to Rector Benítez about the possibility of giving him a license to allow him to pursue doctoral studies. Additionally, he was offered an appointment as assistant instructor, with a corresponding salary, to help him finish the dissertation. The rector had no objection to recommending a license with salary and in September of 1948, he was already in the United States. In a year and a half he took the required classes, passed the tests for Portuguese and French, and defended the dissertation before the History and Political Science faculties. He was recommended for a Ph.D. with a specialty in Latin America in January of 1950 and returned to the faculty of the University of Puerto Rico. Three years later (1953), to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the UPR, books and writing that deserved publication were selected.

The History of Black Slavery in Puerto Rico was chosen, after it had been revised by the author. The 719 pages presented as a doctoral dissertation were reduced to 439, including an extensive bibliography and an index of materials to be more attractive to the reader and was published by the University of Puerto Rico Press. The topic was accessible to the general public, which did not know about it, to professors and to students. Foreign critics responded with true enthusiasm and excellent reviews. The selected bibliography, manuscripts, collected documents, local sources, flyers, and newspapers relevant to the topic were responsibly examined. Included were the works by Arthur Ramos of Brazil, by José Antonio Seco and Fernando Ortiz of Cuba, and others. It was truly a pioneering effort in our historical literature and received praise from foreign colleagues and silence from the local ones who read it, but said nothing. Without expecting it or seeking it, the work won the First Prize in Literature in 1953, which was granted by the Institute of Puerto Rican Literature. Today, six editions have been printed and a seventh edition is being prepared for next May. It was 10 years of responsible research work that both the people of Puerto Rico and the intellectuals of other countries have referred to.

V. An unexpected biography

Biography is the most difficult historical genre and the one most questioned by readers of this kind of literature. Your speaker considers it his most prestigious contribution to Puerto Rican history. Without intending to, the author found himself immersed in a study of a famous man who was, for many, one of the most controversial Puerto Rican thinkers of the late 19th century and the early decades of the 20th. It all started in an unexpected way. One morning he received a telephone call from two former school mates from the fifth grade at the Rafael Balseiro Maceira School of Barceloneta. They were Ángel and Josefina Acosta Matienzo, who were then professors at the UPR, and who wanted advice from your speaker, who was then director of the Department of History, about what to do with papers and other documents that belonged to their grandfather and had been stored at their residence in the country near Río Piedras. After a quick look at the papers, it was recommended they be used for a biography that would make known the enormous work of the exceptional thinker, philosopher, extraordinary orator, free thinker, Mason and spiritualist, politician and patriot Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón, forgotten by everyone. I visited the family of Ángel Acosta Velarde and his wife, Josefina Matienzo, daughter of the patriot, and agreed to work on a biography of the famous native son. But the documents that they had, which would form the body of the future work, had to be complemented with additional research that your speaker would have to do where possible. He took advantage of a trip to Europe offered to students at the University of Puerto Rico, sponsored by the administration of Rector Benítez, who believed that he would contribute to the cultural experience of the young students and appointed him to lead the trip in question. And that led the young instructor to make a visit to the University of Barcelona, where Rosendo had studied law as a young man. Great was your servant's astonishment when the secretary of the institution took him to the repository where academic files of students were stored. He took the file of Rosendo and was kind enough to call the office that made photocopies to reproduce the file of Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón and provide them to your speaker the next day. Everything fell into place. Copies of such important documents were in hand. Delight was unlimited and the confidence placed in him deserved sincere praise. These and other documents located in other archives contributed to the creation of a work that can be seen as the most valuable contribution of the author to the Puerto Rican bibliography. For many who have read it, the work is a jewel of research.

The work consists of two volumes: the biographical study and a compilation of his written work, which may be the subject of new research about the lively thoughts of the distinguished Puerto Rican. Many have read its content but said nothing about the value or faults of the work, which may well be beneficial for a people who need to know their history.

Twelve years of research should not be forgotten by a people who do not know it.

The Institute of Puerto Rican Literature, which provided funding for its publication, denied it the prize it should have received, deciding that since the institute sponsored the publication, it would be seen as a conflict of interest if they also granted it the prize it unquestionably deserved. The people are now asking for it to be reissued and Director D'Alsina of the University Press has offered to respond affirmatively to this justified request.

In the case of your speaker, prizes have arrived without being sought. The truly important prizes are those granted by readers who read what has been written.

Your speaker has not ceased in his task of making known documentation that can shed light on the issues of the Island. He prepared an edition with an introduction and notes on the famous document submitted to the Information Board on April 10, 1867, about the Abolition of Slavery in Puerto Rico, which was published in 1959. It consisted of 108 pages. It included an introduction by your servant and 28 pages of footnotes. A second edition was prepared by Editorial Edil of Río Piedras in 1978, consisting of 101 pages. While working on that edition, your speaker taught courses on the History of Puerto Rico and the History of the Americas at the university. Many years were dedicated to research about the history of the nation, so it made sense for the author to write a volume of history about Puerto Rico covering the colonial period he had discussed in his classes for nearly 45 years.

Thus arose the idea of writing a volume on the *History of Puerto Rico, From its Origins to the End of Spanish Sovereignty over the Island* (1898), consisting of 718 pages of text, with an index to make it easier to find facts about the four centuries of Spanish rule in Puerto Rico, and a bibliography that is located in footnotes in the 23 chapters that make up the book. It is the product of so many years devoted to explaining the subject. The author saw it as a book that would serve professors, students and the people of the nation in understanding something of the history of their land. The book has a selected bibliography by chapter and an index of contents to help locate needed facts. There is no perfect book and no complete content. Puerto Rico needs more history textbooks and greater interest in the discipline. Look at the United States, where hundreds of texts are produced and used in educational institutions and are read avidly by the public to learn about themselves. We should applaud the preparation of the greatest possible number of texts and research works about our history. We should stop being a people without history.

VI. A history of the 20th century

An important contribution by your speaker was the *History of the 20th Century*, about the "struggles of a people to achieve economic stability, political definition and cultural affirmation" that brought the story up to 1996. It is 643 pages of text, with the respective bibliographies at the end of each chapter that allow the reader to consult the issues he is concerned with. It has, as is advisable, an index at the end that makes it easy to consult. And as always it is subject to adverse or favorable criticism of its content. The problem of this island is economic. The scarcity of natural resources and the policy of consumerism of U.S. products that compete with ours are in part responsible for the precariousness of life in our little country. Four centuries of Spanish colonialism has been followed by a century of U.S. colonialism. Our hard-working people are our source of wealth. In the face of competition from the United States, the people must depend on the aid that may be offered by the dominating nation, give up or migrate to the United States. The total dependence in all corners of life does not allow us to live with security or be proud of who we are. The alternative is to emigrate and contribute to the increasing population of that country, to join the "ghetto" and enjoy some social welfare with those who left before you.

VII. Some heartfelt words

In this beloved native land, responsible criticism does not exist. There is no doubt that

all the published books are read, but there is no criticism to illuminate the readers. Authors do not have any inducement to discover the defects and positive points of their works, which is so necessary for them and for the reading public. Those who write about our history, based on serious research, deserve recognition, awards and congratulations. Write as you think, think as you are, with a deep sense of what it means for the person who reads what is written.

To you, my distinguished friends, I owe thanks for your presence and attention to the person who is honored to speak to you on such a significant occasion. Good night ... and sincere thanks.