What did you think of the various women’s organizations before 1935?

I became knowledgeable about institutions when I studied in MEMCH [Chilean Women’s Liberation Movement]. At that time, it occurred to me to write a history of the Chilean feminist movement and, with this goal, I began to review the past newspaper articles to see what they used to say about women’s actions in this country. There I discovered, much to my surprise, that the only newspaper that dealt with this subject was The Workers’ Wake Up Call (El Despertador de los Trabajadores), which Luis Emilio Recabarren published. He was the founder of the Belén de Sárraga [Women’s] centers. They were small groups, composed of wives and children of nitrate workers. They aimed to organize women from the cultural viewpoint. Later, I became aware of the Reading Circle that Amanda Labarca founded. There also were the National Council of Women and the Valparaíso Women’s Union, but they were not activist organizations (instituciones de lucha); they had more of an academic feel. They had women of a certain intellectual level. They studied the woman problem, but they did not engage in political struggle with strength or energy.

How was MEMCH formed?

Organizations do not form because a group of women meet. There has to be a confluence of economic, political, and social factors, which make possible the emergence and sustainability of organizations. Without this, organizations are impermanent. These factors precisely were produced with the birth of MEMCH in the decade of the 1930s. The idea of the Popular Front was already developing and there was great agitation of progressive groups. Moreover, at that moment, there were many women with university degrees. The number of women working in industry, commerce, and public administration had grown. All that enabled a group of women to form an organization to defend their rights.

I have to say that at the first meeting, there was considerable discussion of the organization’s name. At that time—I’m talking about almost 60 years ago—to speak of liberation was to speak, really, of something that seemed very obscene. OK, what did these women want? They wanted a true libertinism. Because of the name, there arose a series of attacks on the part of the country’s conservative sectors. They supposed that we were going to dedicate ourselves to free love. To be emancipated, in that time, was an ugly thing.

What was MEMCH?

MEMCH was a politically pluralist organization. It called out to women of all social classes and all economic levels. We had university women, white collar workers, blue collar workers, peasants, domestics, professionals, housewives, and one thing in common united us all: to fight for women’s economic, social, and juridical liberation. The truth is that only the most progressive women joined MEMCH.

How did the public react to the formation of MEMCH?

Within MEMCH there was considerable homogeneity; but outside of MEMCH, there were conservative groups that succeeded in electing three women to the town council in municipal
elections. They were conservative women and they had a closed position. They vigorously opposed MEMCH and they even published in the press that people should be suspicious of this organization because it was manipulated by communists. . . .

**How was the FECHIF (Chilean Federation of Women’s Organizations) founded?**

FECHIF was born of the first National Congress of Women, not just by MEMCH, but a large group of women. Its objective, as its name indicates—Federation of Women’s Organizations—was to fight for women’s rights. During the first Congress Amanda Labarca was elected president and, as I already said, she exercised her role brilliantly and democratically.

**During the epoch of FECHIF the coexistence among women’s organization ceased. Why?**

The truth is that problems arose when Gabriel González Videla came to power. Then he began a great campaign against the popular sectors and the Radical group within FECHIF adhered to this policy and obtained the expulsion of Communist Party delegates. Within FECHIF there were delegates from the various political parties, Socialist, Radical, and Communist. I did not like the FECHIF’s decision to expel the communists. What’s more, it made the decision without a majority. MEMCH was not present at that session and it was a mistake because the communists played a positive role in the campaign for the vote. After that, MEMCH decided to withdraw from FECHIF and I withdrew along with them. I do not like to fight. I prefer to withdraw from where I’m not wanted.

**What social price did you pay for your service as the general secretary of MEMCH?**

Well, I suffered a certain rejection because they never gave me an opportunity to hold any office. In reality, my skills were wasted a little because at that time I was a very studious and diligent woman. I could have achieved many things, but being branded as a person of the extreme left deprived me of many possibilities.

**Do you consider yourself a person of the extreme left?**

No. I have never been an extreme leftist. I am, you might say, a moderate socialist. I believe in a society that, with respect for liberty and human rights, assures the population free education and healthcare, adequate housing and food.

**Were you ever a party militant?**

No, never.

**How did you achieve this? It was very difficult not to become a party militant.**

I have always been an independent person. Perhaps I was influenced by the anarchist tendency in my student days. That feeling of not wanting to subordinate myself to a command, to a restriction that a political party can impose.
Could you discuss the paradox that, days after women received the right to vote, your enrollment in the Electoral Registration was cancelled?

In reality, the cancellation of my enrollment in the Electoral Registration was unjust and arbitrary. There was no reason, absolutely none, to deprive me of my rights under the Law for the Defense of Democracy, which authorized the cancellation of voting rights for members of the Communist Party. I simply was not a member of that party, nor any other party. I suspect that the measure was taken, in a certain way, as vengeance because I had participated actively in the campaign to obtain the freedom of women detained in the Pisagua prison camps. You will recall that they took some 40 women there and, most dramatically, not only did they take women, but their children as well. There were almost 100 children that lived in a deplorable situation. We undertook a national and international campaign. It produced a veritable scandal. I think that this motivated the cancellation of my enrollment. Fortunately, the law established the possibility of appeal and I naturally filed my complaint and defended myself personally.

Where were you when the law was promulgated?

When the Women’s Suffrage Act was promulgated, it was an extraordinary act attended by the President of the Republic, the ministers of State, the Diplomatic Corps, and all the country’s most important people. And what’s curious is that they did not invite me, who had fought so much for women’s right to vote. The only thing that Gabriel González Videla did was to sign the bill approved by Congress, like every other president. But he did it with such great fanfare that there are still people who say that Gabriel González Videla gave us the right to vote. And that is just not true. The right to vote was obtained as the result of more than twenty years of struggle sustained by thousands of Chilean women. That is why on that day, I was in my house. I am the kind of person who does not go where I am not invited. . . .

Madame Elena, with what current of feminism today do you identify yourself?

I always have argued that there is only one feminism, but that there are different orientations within it. Reformist feminism only pursues women’s equality before the law. We have radical feminism that stresses the problem of sex. Then there’s a third group, which argues that women will win their liberation with a change in the social structure. I associate myself with this third tendency and I think that, in addition to changes in the social structure, there have to be changes in the mentality of both men and women. Because there are many women who believe in patriarchy (son machistas); well, that has to change. But it will take many years, as many years, perhaps, as the patriarchal system has endured. . . .