



Zahira Obaya. / LUIS MAGÁN

Day of reckoning for young survivor at March 11 bombing trial

PABLO ORDAZ, Madrid

Zahira Obaya, a 24-year-old woman from Cádiz, sat in one of the front rows last Thursday at the March 11 trial currently underway in Madrid. Obaya was one of the nearly 2,000 people injured in the train bombings in and near Atocha station.

Her face was badly disfigured by one of the blasts, and doctors had to reconstruct it urgently without a photograph to go on. Although the operation was a success, Zahira lost her left eye.

She had come to Madrid to undergo further surgery, but a bout of flu meant the operation was postponed. She then decided to go to the customized Casa de Campo courtroom instead, where the mass trial began last month and will resume this Monday.

"I needed to show them what they had done to me, to let them see — through me — all the horror they have caused," she said.

Sitting in the defendant's chair that day were Fouad El Morabit and Abdelmajid Bouchar, two of the men accused of perpetrating the crime. "I didn't speak to them. I just wanted them to see me. To tell them with my presence: look at me, look what you did to my face, I wasn't like this before. I am wearing this eye patch because of you. But you haven't managed to change me. I have learned to accept this new face in front of the mirror," she added. "Not one of them was able to sustain my stare," Zahira recalled.

Happy and guilty

When she left the trial, Zahira said she felt happy — not just because she was able to look the alleged bombers in the eye. She walked with her father to Atocha train station and then went for a long walk across Madrid, enjoying the good weather. "I felt happy; I felt like I was five centimeters taller. I have to confess that before the trial I had my reservations. From the outside it's very easy to say 'we'll never know the truth, things will be covered up.' But once you're there and you see the work that's being done by the lawyers, the attorney general and the judge... all of that gives you confidence."

Despite her recovery, Zahira says that sometimes, thinking about all the mothers who lost a son or daughter that day, she feels guilty for being so happy.

"I am happy for having stayed alive and kept moving my life forward. They don't have the right to take away even a minute of it."



José Jiménez (left) and David Owens kiss in support of gay marriage in New York in July 2006. / AP

Love exiles clamor for equality

US immigration laws force gay couples to seek refuge elsewhere

MARTIN DELFÍN, Madrid

Up until a few years ago, Gordon Stewart never would have believed that one day he would be forced to pack his bags and leave his beloved native New York — all in the name of love.

An executive with a leading pharmaceutical company in Britain, Stewart is one of many US citizens compelled to live abroad because US immigration officials refuse to grant his foreign male partner the right to live in the United States as they would if he were in a heterosexual relationship. In other words, gays and lesbians who are not US residents cannot come to the United States to be with their US partners under the same clause that affords bi-national straight couples the right to do so.

When Stewart's Brazilian partner, who was living with him in New York, went back to São Paulo for a routine renewal of his student visa seven years ago, the US Consulate rejected his application. The surprising episode not only left the man stuck in his home country but turned Stewart's life — as he puts it — upside down because there was nothing he could legally do to bring his friend back home. "I feel ashamed of my country for treating my partner this way," Stewart said during a recent panel discussion about the situation, which was sponsored by the Madrid chapter of Democrats Abroad.

While their exact numbers are not known, these "love exiles," as they call themselves, are now making their voice heard through an international lobbying effort to pressure Congress to pass the Uniting American Families Act — a pending bill that would allow US citizens and legal permanent residents in same-sex relationships to bring their foreign partners to the United States much in the same way heterosexuals for years have been able to do so.

Martha McDevitt-Pugh, a San Francisco native who lives

in Amsterdam and heads up the Love Exiles Foundation (www.loveexiles.org), has been traveling to different countries to garner support from both straight and gay US citizens living abroad. "We're not asking for a complete overhaul of the immigration laws; all that needs to be done is to change a few words," said McDevitt-Pugh — who is married to an Australian woman — during her recent swing through Madrid.

A similar effort to balance the law, called the Permanent Partners Immigration Act, failed to muster enough support in a Republican-backed Congress after it was introduced in 2003. But McDevitt-Pugh says that,

"I feel ashamed of my country for treating my partner in this way"

with Democrats now making up the congressional majority, UAF-A has a better chance and is quickly gaining support. Last year, Democrats Abroad, which is represented in more than 80 countries, passed a resolution in support of the measure, Madrid chapter president Kristi Green said.

Although gay marriage has been legalized in a few states, it is still not recognized under federal law. According to the last census taken in 2000, six percent of the reported 594,391 same sex partnerships included one US citizen and a non-citizen. But of that number, no one knows exactly how many couples have since left the country to avoid immigration hassles.

For many professionals such as Sylvia, a New York public school teacher, the move abroad can be a devastating one. Sylvia, who asked that her last name not be used for this article, had to choose between leaving her el-

derly parents behind or split with her Spanish partner, who has not been able to obtain a US visa to remain permanently in the United States. Born to Greek parents, Sylvia was able to legally migrate to Spain — in the years before gay marriage was approved in July 2005 — because she held a European Union passport. But because her leave of absence from her teaching job expires this year, she must soon decide whether to remain in Spain or give up her career in New York. "It makes me angry that, because of my sexuality, I don't have the same rights as any other citizen. Spain is nice and wonderful, but it is not home," she said.

In Stewart's case, his move didn't involve a career challenge. Still, he says, it was difficult at first because he had to explain to his bosses back home — coming out of the closet in so doing — why he needed to move abroad. Luckily, his pharmaceutical company, like many large US corporations, extends benefits, such as health and life insurance, to domestic partners. His employer understood his position and British immigration law allowed Stewart to bring his Brazilian partner to live with him. Britain is among 19 nations that currently recognize bi-national same-sex partnerships.

But when Stewart and his partner tried to go back to the United States for a visit, the US Consulate in the United Kingdom denied the Brazilian a tourist visa. Stewart explained that consulate officials told his friend that, considering his situation, they believed he would be tempted to remain in the United States. So now when Stewart wants to visit his nephew and take his partner along, family reunions must take place in Canada, where immigration laws are not as strict. "All of this upheaval in my life has occurred just because the US government doesn't recognize same-sex partnerships."

Researchers find over 785,000 "ghost voters" on Portugal's rolls

MIGUEL MORA, Madrid

For a long time Portugal has suspected that its voter rolls do not reflect real changes in the population — but nobody knew the true extent of the disparity until now. Two political science students from Lisbon University have shown there are at least 785,000 "ghost voters," or 8.92 percent of the total registered electorate.

"One of every 11 registered voters does not exist," concludes the report, based on cross-referencing data from several institutions. The clearest case is the island of Madeira, where over 20 percent of registered voters no longer live there, or possibly have died. This means that the region was able to elect six deputies instead of five in the 2005 legislative elections.

The last time the census was cleaned up of non-existent voters was in 1998, said the report's authors, Luis Humberto Teixeira and José Antonio Bourdain. Then, 443,000 names were deleted — nearly five percent of the total registered voters in Portugal.

"Since then, nobody has cleaned up again, so that deceased people, emigrants who leave the country and workers who move to a different city continue to be on the lists," said Teixeira, who added that if the lists had been revised, the recent referendum on abortion might have yielded 50 percent abstention rather than 54 percent, making the "yes" vote valid.

Euro-parliament's Cashman tours Spain's real-estate scandal hotspots

S. H. / S. U., Madrid

Michael Cashman, a member of Britain's Labour Party and the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, has been visiting Spanish towns to hear complaints from neighbors regarding uncontrolled construction. As vice-president of the EU's Petitions Committee, Cashman is taking note of complaints before drawing up a report for the European Commission.

"If the EC considers it opportune, it will open an investigation. If human rights are being violated, as was reported, we can ask the European Parliament to intervene," said Cashman, while warning: "I don't have a magic wand to solve problems."

Last week, the Petitions Committee visited parts of Almería and Valencia, and, on Saturday, Madrid, where residents complained that the ruling Popular Party (PP) is planning to build 8,910 new homes in Galapagar, a mountain town in the sierra to the north of the capital. In nearby San Lorenzo de El Escorial, another woman complained that the city hall, also in the hands of the PP, wants to build an additional 7,000 homes.

The PP has complained that Cashman is not visiting towns ruled by the Socialist Party where urban planning scandals have taken place, such as Ciempozuelos in the Madrid region.