

The Hum Podcast

Episode 29: “We Don’t See Their Struggle”

[Theme music fades in]

Scarlet: Right now, we have, for example, 1000 political prisoners and their family. We don't see their struggles because then most of the prisoners are the breadwinners of the family. 300,000 children die every year from malnourishment. They're not getting food.

[Music increases in volume]

Speaker: You're listening to The Hum.

[Music decreases in volume]

Simona: This episode today is generously sponsored by the good people at Boxcar Social, a café and bar that offers a curated, rotating menu showcasing the world's best coffee roasters, wine makers, craft breweries, and whiskey distillers, and also one of my favorite places in Toronto to chill in. With four locations in the city, be sure to check them out in person or visit them online at www.boxcarsocial.ca.

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Gilad: We are so honored to be joined here today by Scarlet Estrada, who's an activist and also a voice for the Venezuelan military prisoners. She was born in Venezuela and immigrated to Canada about 10 years ago. She joins us today to talk about the current crisis in Venezuela and also to fill us in on the forgotten political prisoners in the country. Scarlet, thank you so much for joining us here today. How are you?

Scarlet: Good. Great. Thank you for having me here.

Gilad: We're really honored to have you here, and we were actually talking before we hit the record button that we haven't done any or many, I have to go back and look, episodes on Latin America, and so it's a real honor to be able to open up this conversation on that region with you, and especially about Venezuela because Venezuela right now is in a crisis and a turmoil that many people sadly don't really know about. Before we jump into that, we mentioned that you immigrated to Canada. Can you tell us more about when you immigrated or what led you to immigrate here, and can you tell us a little bit about your experiences growing up in Venezuela? What was that like?

Scarlet: Absolutely. We actually were on a work assignment in the States when Chavez was re-elected, and at that time, we were like, "This is the end of it." We were planning on having kids, and there was rumors that the government wanted to implement sort of like a shared custody between the parents and the citizens, so we were like, "No way. We're not going to have a government decide where we're going to send our kids to school," or sort of like it happens in Cuba, where they make sure that their parents are not giving them information against the government or something, so we applied to the professional immigrant class to Canada. That was the country that we felt was closer to our lifestyle and our values and our way of living. And sure enough, about a couple of years later, we were able to immigrate to Canada as professional immigrants, and it's been our home since.

Gilad: That's great, and Venezuela today is radically different than it was I imagine when you were growing up there, correct?

Scarlet: Yes. That's absolutely right, and that's something that I always try to mention to Canadians, and especially when you exercise your right to vote and your right to make complaints and all that because 30 years ago, we wouldn't have imagined something like this happening, a crisis of this level, a humanitarian crisis like this. In my case and in many cases, you're not going to have a Venezuelan that hasn't been directly affected by this situation, whether it is for having a relative that is a political prisoner or having a relative that died for lack of medication for the most basic items and stuff like that. Growing up in Venezuela was something that you had the streets, they were safe. Sure, it was actually very similar to Canada right now. It's like, "Oh, politicians, they don't do anything," or, "Oh, the economical crisis," or, "Oh, the salary, it's not enough in the middle class," and all that, but looking back, we were blessed with a quality of life.

Scarlet: It was safe to be on the streets. It was safe to speak your mind. It was safe to go and vote for the candidates you didn't like. You could change that. If this president in this term wasn't good enough, then you would vote for the opponent or the other party in the next time, which is something that doesn't happen today. So basically, I always tell my Canadian friends, it's like, "Don't take anything for granted, and don't ever think that you don't have the power to change, or make sure that your government don't fall or your country don't fall into fast-track to misery and all that just because you think your voice is so small that it's not going to be enough."

Simona: One thing I'm always really interested with the guests that we interview is it wasn't just one day it all changed. Sometimes, it starts slow. It starts, there's some rhetoric that's coming out, and I think as we see with the election of Trump, we as North Americans saw that process for the first time. When did it

become apparent that Venezuela was going to be in trouble? What chain of events did you start noticing that, "Hey, we need to be more aware"?

Scarlet: I cannot pinpoint a specific date. The way we always picture it or we always say is it's like cooking a frog. You put a frog in the stove in cold water, and then you start slowly increasing the heat. The frog doesn't know it's being cooked. The frog dies. That's the way it happened in Venezuela. It started slowly. Chavez was really smart in the way he did things and the way he spin things, and you would actually think, "Oh, it makes sense," the same way you see in the U.S., people say, "It makes sense." He was really smart in addressing things that people wanted to hear, so that's how he got a lot of support from many people that were innocent.

Scarlet: In our family, we had all sort of opinions, divided opinions, but it wasn't never about hating each other, but it basically happened slowly. In my case, I think every Venezuelan has a point where they said, "This is enough." In our case was pretty much when he got re-elected, and then in other cases, he signed an executive order contravening whatever the voters decided because they were petitioning a few things, and at that time, I was like, "That is when you run," because that is a dictatorship. The voters said something, and they find a way to do the exact opposite.

Gilad: He was elected on a platform because he grew up in poverty as well, and so his campaign was very relatable for a lot of people. A lot of people thought, "Finally, here's someone who actually really started, as we say, from the bottom and rose to the top," and so a huge part of his platform was to get the country out of poverty, to help those who are impoverished but also to help the Indigenous population, and so I'm curious to know while he was in power, was he successful in doing that? Because Chavez, not only is his image so polarizing, it depends on how you talk to and how they feel about Chavez, but his legacy as well, the things that he actually did do, so did he deliver on those promises?

Scarlet: Well, when Chavez was in power, the oil was about 100 dollars per barrel. During that time, the Venezuelan government received about 13 times the Plan Marshall in revenue. That's massive amount of money. That's the amount of money that could have been used for 18 European countries, and so sure, if you ask people, some of that money went back to the communities. Some of that money went back to in terms of infrastructure or medical, but not in the proportion of the amount of revenue that was received, and that's something that a lot of people don't see and don't know. Some of that money went to big PR agencies, like international PR agencies, and they were the best of the best.

Scarlet: And they made sure they publicized those small investments they were making while they were stealing most of the money. They were taking most of the

money away, their friends, whoever was ... we call it "enchufados," which is "plugged in," so you basically need a connection to the government, and then you see them, and we call them "bolichicos," which means a different class where you only need to be connected to the government, so yes, those people are going to tell you, "Oh yeah, he built hospitals," but not in the proportion of the amount of massive revenue. He could have rebuilt Latin America, the whole South America continent because of the amount of money and the massive revenue they had received. Of course, then the old revenue decreased because the price of the barrel went down and also because they didn't re-invest some of the money back in the infrastructure and in the industries and in anything that produces money, they started pretty much importing every single item.

Scarlet: They took all the industries, and then they took them to bankrupt, so that's what caused the crisis right now, because they were thinking that that barrel was going to continue to be 100 dollars per barrel forever. In fact, you can find Chavez saying, "It's going to be like that forever," because they were capitalizing on the Middle Eastern situation, and they thought, "This is the way it's going to be, so we can keep stealing money, investing a little bit of money in infrastructure and whatever to be keeping people happy." The poorest, of course, they chose the right areas. They chose the target just to make sure that their efforts were being publicized, but in reality, they weren't doing that much.

Simona: I think that was kind of the narrative that was really coming out, was that if you are against Chavez, you're against the poor because this guy's doing things for the communities who are not considered part of Venezuelan community for a really long time. They were kind of left to the margins, and you mentioned something really interesting about the things that we don't see, so one thing that as an outsider, we see the long lines of people waiting to get food. We see the long lines of people waiting to get medical care and having to be turned away, because there's not even Tylenol or Advil in the country, so I really want to know what else are we not seeing that's happening in Venezuela?

Scarlet: Right now, we have, for example, 1000 political prisoners and their family. We don't see their struggles because then most of the prisoners are the breadwinners of the family, so now not only you have a person in prison, you also don't have the person that was producing the money, so you're not seeing that. A lot of kids, newborns, are dying every single day because they're put in cardboard boxes. They don't have hospitals because they never invested in the health system, or they didn't invest enough. The hospitals are in the most horrible conditions. We had an experience with one of the rebels when he was in hospital, and he sent us pictures of his room, and we were seeing broken glass. We were seeing a little fridge that the door was in very bad condition. It really looked like the hospital was bombarded. It looked like a war hospital, and it's like, "Oh my God, we are not at war, and this is the condition of our hospitals."

Scarlet: You see one of the numbers that, in my case, it really breaks my heart because I'm a mom, it's like 300,000 children die every year from malnourishment. They're not getting food, and they're not getting the nutrition. The ones that are getting food are not getting a proper nutrition, so their bodies are not going to be developed the way they should, so 20 years from now, we're going to have grown-ups that are not going to be able to function properly because their body didn't develop the way it was supposed to, so we're wondering what's going to happen to our country 20 years from now, when only 20 percent of our kids were fed certain food, low-quality? Because what they eat is, for example, I've heard stories that break my heart, like for example, the moms cook a little bit of soup with wheat, and they give it to their kids. What kind of nutrition is that? They're killing all sort of animals they find on the streets. They're eating dogs, street dogs. They find them on the street. They cook them, and they eat them because there's no food. Cats, you name it, and that for me, it's so grim, and it's something that I wouldn't have imagined 30 years ago.

Gilad: It's so heartbreaking to hear all of those statistics, and I actually just want to go back to something that you said. Did you say 300,000?

Scarlet: Yes.

Gilad: Annually-

Scarlet: 300,000 annually children are dying from malnourishment.

Gilad: I hope that whoever's listening that just sits there for a while because that's astronomical. I'm curious to know, in the country, what are people learning media-wise? And I ask this because I got to go to Venezuela, we were talking about this earlier, back in 2007, and I was there for a month, and it was at the exact same time that Chavez, while he was alive, shut down a thing called Radio Caracas, which was the last really truly open media source. It also employed I think 3000 people, and so he shut it down, and I remember when I was there, there was mass protests. I remember seeing police outside. They would be firing rifles up in the air. They would jump out of the back of their pickup truck. They'd use the back of their assault rifles and smack people in the head with them. They would cuff them, throw them in, and it seemed like they were arresting innocent people. It was chaos, honestly probably the scariest situation I've ever been in. I'm curious to know now, 12 years later, what are people receiving in terms of news? How honest is the information coming out inside the country for Venezuelans?

Scarlet: Officially, they're not receiving anything. Recently, we saw on CBC they sent reporter there, and the way that Chavez ruled and now Maduro is by president, by milestones. The Radio Caracas TV was their milestone or their president for

media. That was, "This is what we're going to do," and from there, it was media shutdown, mission media shutdown. Same with the judges. We have a president, which is with a judge called Maria Afiuni, how the law require her to act. He fired her on television. I'm talking a president firing a judge. How independent is that? And she was took to jail. She was raped. She was mistreated, human rights all sort of violation, but that was the president that's telling the rest of the judiciary, "This is what we're going to do."

Scarlet: And you can pinpoint situations like this happening in every single organization, so the people are not receiving anything 24/7. Let me put you an example. We had the blackouts a couple of days ago. The TV, the radio, nobody was doing that, so what's the window to the world? And it's social media. The other day, I heard a coworker, because I was saying if you had retired phones, give them to me because I can find a way to send them, and he was like, "I cannot understand why people don't have anything to eat, but they would have a smartphone," and it's like, haven't you considered that this is their window to the world? This is how, first of all, they tell their relatives how they are, and second of all, they receive information of what's going on.

Scarlet: We have friends that send us messages, and it's like, what's going on? What do they know? The blackout, when they were trying to get the trucks with humanitarian aid, not a single channel because the ones that are left don't want to be shut down, right? You have the TV channels doing concerts and TV and cooking programs, while all these situations are happening outside. You have not a single reporter, and there is nothing like that, so basically what the Venezuelan people have is social media, and even now, we know that it's going to be shut down. Last couple of days, there is an international lawyer that is trying to bring justice to all these victims. Her name is Tamara Suju, and she found one dissident of the military, of the country intelligence headquarters, and he videotaped some of the situations inside with torture and whatever, and she presented that live. And sure enough, almost halfway through the presentation with the OAS, they shut down internet, and for some reason in Venezuela from that day on, you cannot look up the initials for the country intelligence headquarters. We actually have to talk to our relatives in keywords because if they send us that specific word, it won't get sent. That's how they're shutting down now. They're going after internet, so that's our biggest fear.

Simona: I work with someone who is living in Venezuela right now. I work for the Wikipedia Foundation, and Wikipedia is an open source where you can actually share and upload information, and one of the things that we're noticing coming out of it is he's giving us kind of information as he gets it about what he needs because we'll be seeing him shortly. It's very interesting that now all mechanisms of information are being shut down, which is kind of in the playbook of a dictator, but a lot of people will still say, "Oh, it's an old president who didn't

want to leave," Maduro, and we have this new guy that's been ... Countries around the world have recognized him as the rightful leader, but can you give us a little bit more information on kind of what that actually is looking like between Guaidó and Maduro, who is, Maduro is the current sitting president who has been ousted but still is in power?

Gilad: And who also succeeded Chavez.

Simona: Well, because he was a mentor. Chavez was his mentor, and he was essentially groomed.

Scarlet: Chavez pretty much asked his followers to vote for him whenever he passed away. He's not a sitting president, actually, I would have to say. He won the elections, and I would say "won" between quotations because we still think there was fraud in that election from Maduro, and his six-years term were done on January. Last year, when it was about to call for election, he pretty much didn't allow any opposition member to run. The parties weren't ... Their registration was revoked, so we couldn't have our traditional political parties run for presidency or any independent opposition candidates. Of course, he always has sort of puppets or something like that, and of course he had two "opposition," between quotation, candidates that were former members of his party, and they were saying, "Oh, we're going ... " But in reality, nobody was allowed to run.

Scarlet: And then, even their organization ... We have an electronic voting system. The one company that administers that system came out about a month later saying, "The elections are rigged," so when you have your own electronic voting system programmers state that internationally, international observers, that's something that their followers always mention. They didn't allow the independent international observers, only their own observers. For example, in Canada, we had members of a union go, and they said, "Oh, we had international observation from Canada," but it wasn't an independent organization. If you go to their website, you know their supporters, and it's like, "You had supporters go observe your election, but who did you have on the other side come from the international?"

Scarlet: We also asked for a manual vote. The registry of our electors is also a problem because in my case, I've been outside of the country for 14 years. Every time I try to register that they open international, they put all sort of obstacles, so you have now about seven million Venezuelans that are outside of the country that are not allowed to vote. That can change an election. You have people inside the country that are not allowed to register. You have people that go to the voting poll, and if you are a public employee, you're escorted by a member of your company. Let's say, put it in perspective, Canada, you work for, I don't know,

immigration or refugee. Well, you have somebody from your institution go with you, sit next to you while you're voting, making sure that you're voting for Justin Trudeau, and then if you dare to vote for the other party, then the next day, you're fired.

Scarlet: If you are a family, and you have kids, and you have somebody that has an illness, and you have benefits, you don't want to lose that, so what do you do? You vote for Justin Trudeau, so is that fair? They always said, "Oh, we got eight million voters." Right, and that's why he's not an acting president. He's not our president because he wasn't elected. All international organizations and many countries rejected that. What happened to Guaidó is he's the last organization that was elected, and he's the only organization that is actually ruling by the opposition, so he's the president of our parliament, so what our constitution allows is that when there is a void in the presidential position and vice president, then the president of the parliament can take over until that void is filled, and that's pretty much what Guaidó did. He said, "Well, as of this day, Maduro is no longer an elected president, so I'm taking over until the situation is filled." Of course, Maduro has the military and the judiciary and everybody, so he refuses to leave power, but he's no longer the president, and Guaidó is our interim president until the situation is fixed and the void is filled.

Gilad: We know that you are a voice for political prisoners, and we know that this is an issue that hits very close to home for you. As we understand it, you have a cousin who's currently locked up in prison. We're curious to know how did he end up there, when were you alerted of his arrest, and do you have any idea how he's doing?

Scarlet: Sure. I have actually two close family members. One is my cousin on my side of the family, and the other is my brother-in-law on my husband's side of the family, and that only brings to perspective what I was saying earlier, that every single Venezuelan family has been affected in one way or the other by this dictatorship. My cousin was incarcerated I believe after a social meeting with some of his brother-in-arms, people from his own promotion, which is the script of what goes on with the military. He disappeared for a couple of days. We couldn't know where he was. It happened in November 2015. A few days later, we were able ... because my uncle is also in the military, he received a call from the national guard commander and said, "Come to my office," implying that he was going to release his son.

Scarlet: And sure enough, inside the office, this national guard commander asked my cousin if he was affiliated to the ruling party, and my cousin, being in the military, he was in a catch-22 because it is illegal. You can have a political opinion, but you cannot be affiliated to a political party, so he was like, "No, that's illegal. Why would I do that?" And sure enough, he was sent to jail, and

then what this commander wanted was to make sure that my uncle saw him handcuffed in front of him. I guess he had a beef with him. I don't know. My brother-in-law, two years later, and I need to point this out, we are related, and they knew each other just because of my relationship with my husband, but they weren't acquaintances. They weren't friends. They'd run into each other at a couple of events, and with us being outside of Venezuela, it's even more complicated to get people to meet each other.

Scarlet: My brother-in-law, he was the commander of the battalion that protects the city, so a top battalion. He met with his brother-in-arms, same promotion. They had a meeting. He organized a launch with his battalion. They had some conversations. The crisis in Venezuela is not a secret. It's affecting everybody. I don't know. They were discussing what the level of the situation was and how it was increasing and how it was impossible for the military to keep troops, because the troops are usually the poorest members of the poor classes, and how they were having trouble feeding them, they have to feed them, they have to provide for them and how it was being impossible for them.

Scarlet: Sure enough, one of his brother-in-arms member of his promotion went to and accused him of planning a coup, same as my cousin. Next day, he was visited at the office by the country intelligence agency, and sure enough, they disappeared him for a couple of days, handcuffed in the back, a lot of human rights abuses, not respect for the legal proceedings and what was needed to be done according to the law, and in both cases, not a single proof of a coup, not a single shred of evidence. The defense is not allowed to promote any sort of evidence, and sure enough, they are in jail the same as the rest. Multiply that by 1000, and there you have it. It's the same script over and over again.

Simona: It just seems like there's a playbook in terms of maintaining power is to eliminate those who can influence it, but you also mentioned earlier, before we started taping, is that your cousin's also an artist and that he's found a way to create art in prison and also get it out. How did that practice actually become, and how is that actually kind of being embraced by the community itself?

Scarlet: As you can imagine, their conditions are horrible, and they are in confinement, and they're isolated, and all of them are facing a lot of dark times, so I guess, I don't know who suggested that to him, but he started doing carpentry in jail because his family needed dining set, so he started doing carpentry, and then from there, he started painting, and then he found a way to release that energy and in isolation to sort of express himself, and in a way, I guess he was picturing the outside world. Some of his pieces are really colorful, and really you can see the amount of energy that's been put in them, and my family, they're very resourceful, so what they did is they smuggled the materials in by smiling to the

custodians and hiding it between here and there, between sheets, and whenever they need to bring him clothes or whatever, and then he continued painting.

Scarlet: And then when they could, they started smuggling them out, and when the time was right, they brought them to my aunt in Florida, and now I have them with me, so I will have to find a way to promote them. He wants us to bring them to the world and with his sister because he wants to find a way to support his family. When you talk about the political prisoners, this is people that are very active, very A-type kind of personality, and then you have them isolated, then they're going to find a way to either express themselves or be productive. And then, I am now curious to know how many other prisoners are doing similar efforts. And that's something that we're trying to find out, and I am in conversations with my family to see if others are doing some other things, and then hopefully in the future, we can do some sort of promotion for them and telling their story.

Simona: What is the likelihood of these prisoners being released? Is it when Maduro's out and gone forever, or kind of have you seen other prisoners be able to leave and kind of get off?

Scarlet: The way I'm going to position it is we have to start thinking of them not as prisoners but hostages. Think of Pablo Escobar. They have sort of levels. Each prisoner had value, so whenever they see the pressure mounting, they release here and there one of them, depending on the level of pressure, and then that way, people get distracted by this release or the other, so they're pretty much parts of a game or something like that. They use them as pieces, and yes, some of them have been released. Some of them have negotiated humanitarian reasons to be home, but they cannot leave their home, or they cannot leave the country, or they have to present themselves every other week, so the only chances for them to be truly free is only by the person like Maduro leaving. It's the only way because what are the chances that they're going to wake up tomorrow and say, "Let's release," unless they see pressure mounting.

Scarlet: But for example, in the case of my brother-in-law, which was the commander of this big city, he's one of the crown jewels, right? We know they're only going to release him when they need to exchange him for another top government official. My cousin was actually sentenced last year, the worst sentence in his case or for the cases that he was accused. Of course, my uncle is trying to get that overturned, but the chances are is that they rule. They pretty much make decisions based on whim. Our judiciary is not independent, so the chances are really slim.

Gilad: We were looking at stats. Women in Venezuela face gender-based violence. A report in 2016 showed that 50 percent of women were a victim of domestic

violence, and this is just I guess an estimate. What is it like for a woman living in Venezuela, and how does the current political crisis play into that?

Scarlet: Let's put it in perspective. One of our biggest political opposition leaders is a woman, and she doesn't get any credit. I think she has the most difficult role in the opposition just because she's very opinionated. She's very strong, but she has against her that she's a woman, so that's just to put it in perspective in terms of opposition and government. Political prisoners, 80 percent of our prisoners have suffered some sort of sexual abuse, so you can imagine that every single woman that has been incarcerated, at least 8 out of 10, have suffered some sort of violence and complete disregard for and respect for our women. But having said so, our Venezuelans are very strong, are very passionate, so whenever we are not in that shadow of ... Like in the case of I would say María Corina or any of our leaders, you can see we take nothing, and be afraid because of how strong we can be, and-

Simona: We got to end this, but we have to say, what can we do? What should the international community do? What should Canadians be doing? How can we actually help the situation that's happening and make an impact on what's happening in Venezuela?

Scarlet: One of the things that it's very easy to do is first of all, inform yourself. Don't take propaganda for granted. There is a lot, like I said, PR going on on what's going on. [Inaudible]. There are plenty of Venezuelans around. There is a YouTube influencer, also a woman, Joanna Hausmann, she started a campaign called #Ask a Venezuelan, which intends that corroborate what you're hearing on whatever outlet with a real Venezuelan, and you might have a complete different story of what you're being fed, so get the facts. That's one thing.

Scarlet: Pressure the government. Canada is doing a lot, but we all know the U.S. is trying to steal the spotlight when Canada has been leading the effort for some time now, but there are many other ways to pressure. Canada can pressure Russia, for example. Canada can pressure Cuba. Canada and Cuba have a really strong relationship, and we are not only under one dictator. We are under two because it's our Venezuelan dictator and also the Cuban, so pressure Cuba to hands off Venezuela. Hands off Venezuela, Cuba, because they are the ones that really invaded our country, not the U.S. It's them. Write to your MPs, and tell them it's time that Canada start doing something. Maybe Canada, I don't know, stop going to Cuba, and just pressure them saying, "I'll stop going to Cuba unless you get your hands off Venezuela."

Scarlet: The problem with some of the ONGs is that in Canada, they're not registered as charities. They're registered as not-for-profit, but they're not registered as charities, and many people want their tax receipts, so I have found that the

Mercy Corps and Care.org, they have programs that are addressing the humanitarian crisis, so donate to them, and ask them to direct that donation to the refugee camps surrounding the border in Venezuela, or reach out to any of the Venezuelan groups. There are a few on Facebook and everywhere, and Twitter. We're very high on and we really like technology, and we might be able to tell you how you can help without publicizing us because for safety reason, the only way that the help gets there is if we do it underground, so those are the ways.

Gilad: Thank you so much for joining us. Venezuela is facing turmoil like we've never seen. It's one of the worst, I would say, global humanitarian crises in the world, and not enough people are talking about it. Not enough people know about it, so I would also recommend just listen to this show. Please share it. Take these stories and spread them. Don't just sit at home silent. Let others know what you know. You can't fix something if you don't know there's an issue there. Scarlet, thank you so much for joining us.

[Theme music fades in]

Scarlet: Thank you for having me.

Gilad: We really appreciate having you here. Thanks.

Gilad: My name's Gilad Cohen.

Simona: And I'm Simona Ramkisson.

Gilad: This podcast is edited and produced by Brandon Fragomeni and Alex Castellani. Our associate producer is Ron Ma.

Simona: This is an initiative of JAYU, a charity that shares human rights stories through the arts.

[Music fades out]

Gilad: If you enjoyed this podcast, help us make more of them by donating whatever you can. Visit us online at jayu.ca/donate.