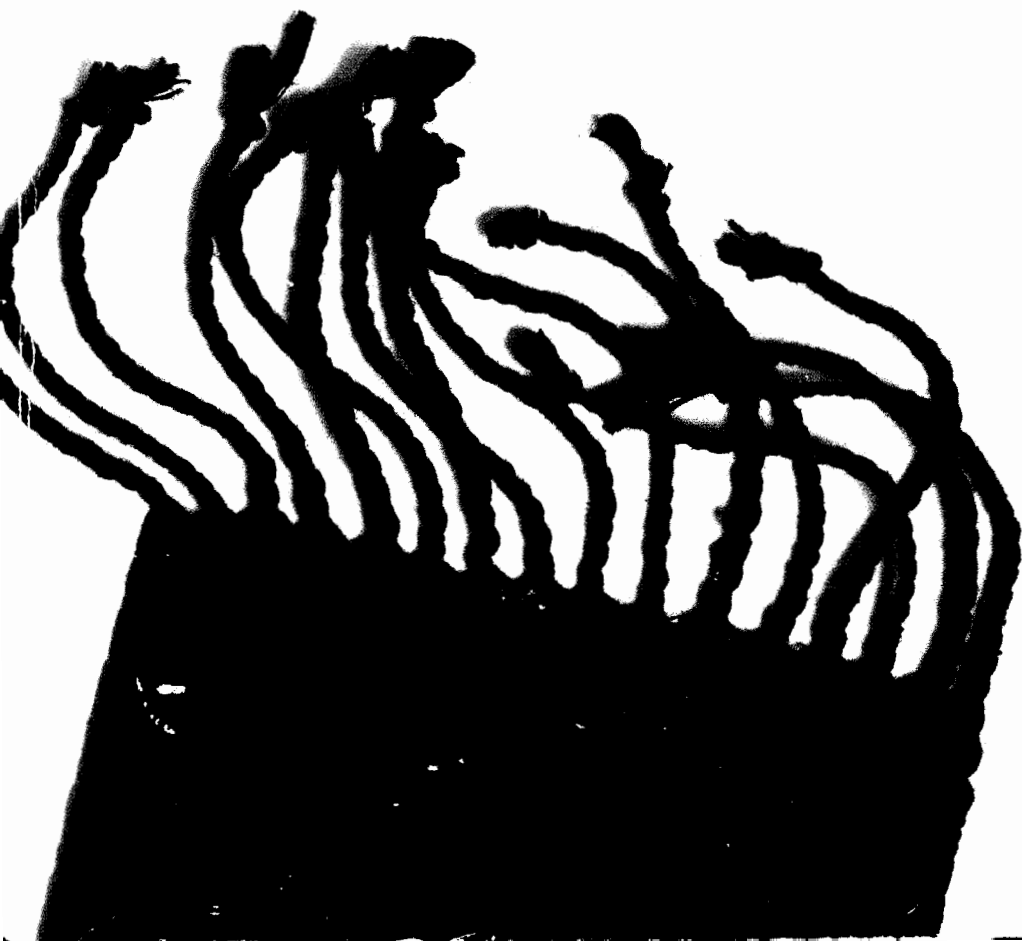


YOU CAN'T DROWN THE FIRE

*Latin American Women
Writing in Exile*

Edited by Alicia Partnoy



Praise for Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance & Survival in Argentina*

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You Can't Drown the Fire:

Latin American Women Writing in Exile

Edited by

Alicia Partnoy

Cleis Press

Pittsburgh • San Francisco

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PARTNOY

You Can't Drown the Fire



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In memory of those
who were exiled from life
So they rest in peace
their bones nurturing
 their motherland,
their souls nurturing
our fight

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Introduction



The women whose fires will speak to you from these pages have suffered all forms of persecution. From the Salvadoran girl who witnessed the assassination of her family to the Argentine mother of a disappeared; from the Colombian journalist whose name was found on a death squad hit list to the Uruguayan writer expelled by the military; from the Guatemalan catechist who lost three brothers to repression to the Chilean activist, jailed and tortured—each of these women was forced into exile. Each left her homeland as a painful, but unavoidable, alternative to the loss of her life, her spirit, her creativity.

It is only in the past decade that a few of these voices have begun to be heard. The testimonies of Rigoberta Menchú and Domitila Barrios were only recently printed and widely circulated. The talents of Marta Traba and Luisa Valenzuela—like Isabel Allende—have finally been recognized and internationally praised. And while some doors have opened for Claribel Alegria, who has traveled this country with her poems, her testimonies, her essays and her incredible patience, the works of Alaide Foppa are practically unknown. Cristina Peri Rossi, Griselda Gambaro, Alicia Dujovne Ortiz are names that, in the United States, only the initiate might have heard. Yet, these women were published, well-known writers before being forced into exile.

After publication of my book about life in an Argentine concentration camp, I sensed a yearning in the United States for writings by other Latin American women, who had also been victims of repression. University professors and students, people in the peace movement and in Amnesty International, feminists and others concerned for Latin America voiced a genuine interest. With the belief that these writings could become a tool for education rather than mere fashion, the women who published my first book quickly responded to my observations and needs. I felt the urgency of bringing the voices of my sisters into this language that I had learned with such difficulty. I strongly needed to share with those sisters the readers who had responded with solidarity to my tales of *The Little School*. The women of Cleis Press offered to publish this anthology.

I began the search for manuscripts with three goals in mind: to build cultural bridges, to destroy stereotypes about Latin American women, and to denounce political repression in our countries.

The building of bridges would have been impossible without translators who contributed the strong, reliable material of their expertise, their love of language, their commitment to Latin America.

Stereotypes about Latin American women mushroom out of the refusal to perceive the diversity of our lives. During my years of exile in the United States, I have met many people who jump to hasty, and erroneous, conclusions about us. For some, we victims of repression are peasant women who suffered persecution only because of the political involvement of our husbands and brothers; for others, we are all urban intellectuals who became too outspoken to be tolerated by our repressive governments.

The voices of Central and South American women, who share a language and a history, will themselves destroy these stereotypes. Grassroots organizers, trade unionists, representatives of student organizations, investigative reporters, outspoken leaders of professional associations, writers, human rights activists—Latin American women have claimed recognition as participants in the political lives of our countries. However, we still encounter discrimination: for those of us who have risked our lives for political and social change, there is seldom a position of power available in government. Yet,

there is one realm in which we have not faced discrimination: Repression.

Yes, these voices speak in the rhythms of a Latin America struggling for freedom and justice. They are, however, as different as the histories of their individual countries; their approach to language varies as do their ages, their goals, their tastes, and the quality of formal education available to them. Their political perspectives are also as diverse. Yet, all of these women share one lucky condition: none was born under the sign of passivity.

In gathering these voices, I asked for writings in Spanish by women from Central and South America who had left their countries after 1970. The seventies had witnessed an increase of state terrorism in Latin America. Desperate oligarchies and multinational corporations resorted to their local military to curtail the social transformations that jeopardized their interests. The doctrine of national security, an ideology embraced by many South American armies, provided the justification to annihilate large numbers of people. These armies saw their nations threatened by an internal enemy. Soon, that enemy was the entire population. Military leaders, trained at the School of the Americas at the Panama Canal, feared they would lose control to civilian governments that would shun U.S. intervention. The military coups in Chile (1973), Uruguay (1973), Argentina (1976), resulted in the spreading of the doctrine of national security. Political prisoners, arrested in any of those countries, were transferred without respect for borders or international treaties, killed or disappeared in a Hell without frontiers.

By the late seventies, the number of 'disappeared' had dramatically increased to 90,000. Those who disappeared were kidnapped by the authorities, kept in unknown locations, tortured and eventually killed in secrecy. Argentine torturers were quick to aid Guatemalan repression, the Bolivian coup of 1980, and the training of the 'contras' who sow terror in Central America. Entire towns were bombed in El Salvador, forcing large masses of people into exile. Hundreds of thousands are still seeking refuge in the United States, a country that provides the means to repress them. Today, thousands of Colombians are fleeing their country where a multitude of right-wing death squads, condoned by the government, terrorizes political

activists and journalists who do not endorse their ideas. In Chile, similar groups have recently threatened artists, journalists and university professors while the government of dictator Pinochet denies any connection. In the seventies, repressive governments perfected their criminal ways of dealing with popular unrest. Under military dictatorships or puppet 'democracies,' disappearance, torture, assassination, imprisonment or expulsion from the country became predictable hazards for any dissidents, their families — children included — and their support networks. Millions of Latin Americans left their countries.

The drawbacks of having established 1970 as a limit became evident when I received a letter from Carmen Batsche. Carmen, a Guatemalan, had fled to Argentina as a child with her exiled mother in 1954, after the coup that overthrew Jacobo Arbenz. Her testimony could not pass unheard. Nor could we deny voice to the experience of Paraguayans, who have lived under the same dictatorship since 1954. Only Dolly Filártiga, who had left Paraguay in 1977, sent her contribution. Central and South America proved to be too large a territory for my networking abilities. Some countries are under represented, others are absent.

The works in this anthology were written while in exile, with the exception of Olga Behar's report. The publication of *Las guerras de la paz* (excerpted here) unleashed a wave of death threats that forced her to leave Colombia.

In the process of contacting as many contributors as possible, I became really aware of the magnitude of the diaspora. Women called from my own neighborhood in Washington D.C., wrote from Spain and France, from California and Massachusetts, from Mexico and Uruguay, from every corner that could have been made into a new home. Women nurtured me with their observations: "Please accept a sister's suggestion: do not let this book become a whining sorrowful lamentation. We shouldn't let exile defeat us..." wrote Jacinta Escudos of El Salvador.

Initially, I defined exile as the forced departure from a person's homeland due to attacks or threats to her life, her family, or her work. This was challenged by the contributors. I soon realized that in countries where repression had taken the most arbitrary, disconcerting

and destructive patterns, it was impossible to predict that a woman who had managed to leave before the personal attacks started would not have become a target had she chosen to stay. Internal exile was another issue raised by the women who corresponded with me. What about those who could never leave their country, but had to survive in silence and fear, banished in their own land? "Haven't Latin American women writers been in internal exile for centuries, their talents considered marginal?" asked poet Marjorie Agosín.

Writer and artist Cecilia Vicuña sent these enlightening words: "Chile is in exile from itself, the country has departed from itself. . . Internal and external exile are just the results of that general negation of our being, negation produced by the dictatorship and economic and cultural dependence." As much as I embrace her definition, I could not follow Cecilia's suggestion to include in this anthology "all women who, due to cultural, political and social reasons, cannot live in their countries or participate effectively in the lives of their homelands." That task, as well as the commitment of rescuing from oblivion the thousands of women who have died for peace and justice in Latin America, will demand our lifetime energies and those of future generations.

Many torches should be added to the thirty-five that burn so brightly in this anthology. That will be done tomorrow. For today, we must not miss the warmth, the energy, the arresting beauty of these fires. We must add our strength to the fires that comfort thousands at refugee camps, to these flames that burn injustice, these torches that cast our shadows on the walls of history.

Washington D.C.
February 1988



I.

**They Won't Drown
My Fire:
Testimony**



Rigoberta Menchú

Guatemala

Rigoberta Menchú was born in Guatemala in 1962. A Quiché Indian, Rigoberta taught herself Spanish at the age of twenty. Among the founders of the Committee for the Peasants' Unity, she has traveled throughout the world as an ambassador of her suffering people. Her testimonial book, I, Rigoberta, which she dictated to Elizabeth Burgos, was awarded the Casa de las Américas prize of Cuba.

Things Have Happened to Me as in a Movie



I am Rigoberta Menchú; I am a native of the Quiché people of Guatemala. My life has been a long one. Things have happened to me as in a movie. My parents were killed in the repression. I have hardly any relatives living, or if I have, I don't know about them. It has been my lot to live what has been the lot of many, many Guatemalans.

We were a very poor family. All their lives my parents worked cutting cotton, cutting coffee. We lived about four months of the year on the high plain of Guatemala, where my father had a small piece of land; but that only supported us a short time, and then we had to go down to the plantations to get food.

During the whole time my mother was pregnant with me, she was on the plantation cutting coffee and cotton. I was paid twenty cents, many years ago, when I started to work in my town in Guatemala. There, the poor, the children, didn't have the opportunity for school; we did not have the opportunity to achieve any other life but working for food and to help our parents buy medicine for our little brothers and sisters. Two of my brothers died on the plantation cutting coffee. One of them got sick, couldn't be cured, and died. The other died when the landowner ordered the cotton sprayed while we were in the field. My brother was poisoned, there was no way to cure him and he died on the plantation, where we buried him.

We didn't know why those things happened. It's a miracle we were

saved several times. When we got sick our mother looked for plants to cure us. The natives in Guatemala depended very much on nature. My mother cured us many times with the leaves of plants, with roots. That is how we managed to grow up. At ten years old, I started to work more in collaboration with my community, where my father, a local, native Mayan leader, was known by all the Indians of the region.

Little by little, my father got us involved in the concerns of the community. And so we grew up with that consciousness. My father was a catechist, and in Guatemala, a catechist is a leader of the community, and what he does especially is preach the Gospel. We, his children, began to evolve in the Catholic religion, and became catechists.

Little by little, we grew up—and really you can't say we started fighting only a short time ago, because it has been twenty-two years since my father fought over the land. The landowners wanted to take away our land, our little bit of land, and so my father fought for it. So he went to speak with the mayors, and with the judges in various parts of Guatemala. Afterwards, my father joined INTA, the land reform institution in Guatemala. For many years, my father was tricked because he did not speak Spanish. None of us spoke Spanish. So they made my father travel all over Guatemala to sign papers, letters, telegrams, which meant that not only he, but the whole community, had to sacrifice to pay the travel expenses. All this created an awareness in us from a very young age.

In the last years, my father was imprisoned many times, the first of those in 1954. My father landed in jail when he was accused of causing unrest among the population. When our father was in jail, the army kicked us out of our houses. They burned our clay pots. In our community we don't use iron or steel; we use clay pots, which we make ourselves with earth. But the army broke everything, and it was really hard for us to understand this situation.

Then my father was sentenced to eighteen years in prison, but he didn't serve them because we were able to work with lawyers to get him released. After a year and two months, my father got out of prison and returned home with more courage to go on fighting and much angrier because of what had happened. When that was over my mother had to go right to work as a maid in the city of Santa Cruz del Quiché, and all of us children had to go down to work on the plantations.

A short time later, my father was tortured by the landowners' bodyguards. Some armed men came to my house and took my father away. We got the community together and found my father lying in the road, far away, about two kilometers from home. My father was badly beaten and barely alive. The priests of the region had to come out to take my father to the hospital. He had been in the hospital for six months when we heard he was going to be taken out and killed. The landowners had been discussing it loudly, and the information came to us by way of their servants, who are also natives, and with whom we were very close. And so we had to find another place for my father, a private clinic the priests found for him so he would heal. But my father could no longer do hard work like he did before. A little later my father dedicated himself exclusively to working for the community, traveling, living off the land.

Several years passed, and again, in the year 1977, my father was sentenced to death. He landed in jail again. When we went to see him in the Pantán jail, the military told us they didn't want us to see my father, because he had committed many crimes. My mother went to Santa Cruz to find lawyers, and from them we learned that my father was going to be executed. When the time of the execution came, many union workers, students, peasants and some priests demonstrated for my father's freedom. My father was freed, but before he left he was threatened; he was told that he was going to be killed anyway for being a communist. From that moment on, my father had to carry out his activities in secret. He had to change the rhythm of his life. He lived hidden in several houses in Quiché, and then he went to the capital city. And so he became a leader of struggle for the peasants. It was then that my father said, "We must fight as Christians," and from there came the idea, along with other catechists, of forming Christian organizations which would participate in the process.

For us it was always a mystery how my father could carry out all those activities, which were very important, despite being illiterate. He never learned to read or write in his life. All his children were persecuted because of his activities, and our poverty really didn't help us defend ourselves, because we were in very sad circumstances.

All my father's activities had created a resentment in us because we couldn't have our parents' affection, because there were a lot of us

children and a bigger worry was how to survive. On top of all this were the problems of the land, which upset my father very much. Many years before, rocks had fallen from the mountain and we had to go down from where we lived. When we went down and cultivated new land, the landowners appeared with documents and they told us the land was theirs before we came. But we knew very well the land had no owner before we got there.

They couldn't catch my father, but in the year 1979, they kidnapped one of my little brothers. He was sixteen. We didn't know who did it. We only knew that they were five armed men, with their faces covered. Since my father couldn't go out, we went with my mother and members of the community to make a complaint to the army, but they said they didn't know anything about what had happened to my brother. We went to City Hall, we went to all the jails in Guatemala, but we didn't find him. After many trips all over my mother was very upset. It had taken a lot for my brother to survive, and so for my mother it was very hard to accept his disappearance.

At that time the army published a bulletin saying there was going to be a guerrilla council. They said they had some guerrillas in their custody and that they were going to punish them in public. My mother said, "I hope to God my son shows up. I hope to God my son is there. I want to know what has happened to him." So we went to see what was happening. We walked for one day and almost the whole night to get to the other town. There were hundreds of soldiers who had almost the whole town surrounded, and who had gathered the people together to witness what they were going to do. There were natives of other areas as well as natives of that town. After a while an army truck arrived with twenty people who had been tortured in different ways. Among them we recognized my brother, who, along with the other prisoners, had been tortured for fifteen days. When my mother saw my little brother she almost gave herself away, but we had to calm her down, telling her that if she gave herself away she was going to die right there for being family of a guerrilla. We were crying, but almost all the rest of the people were crying also at the sight of the tortured people. They had pulled out my little brother's fingernails, they had cut off parts of his ears and other parts of his body, his lips, and he was covered with scars and swollen all over. Among the prisoners was a woman and they had cut off parts of her breasts and other parts of her body.

An army captain gave us a very long speech, almost three hours, in which he constantly threatened the people, saying that if we got involved with communism the same things were going to happen to us. Then he explained to us one by one the various types of torture they had applied to the prisoners. After three hours, the officer ordered the troops to strip the prisoners, and said: "Part of the punishment is still to come." He ordered the prisoners tied to some posts. The people didn't know what to do and my mother was overcome with despair in those few moments. And none of us knew how we could bear the situation. The officer ordered the prisoners covered with gasoline and they set fire to them, one by one.

Interviewed by César Chelala

Translated by Regina M. Kreger



Mercedes Sosa

Argentina

Mercedes Sosa was born in 1935, in the Tucumán Province. A singer of Latin American music, she draws from the traditional as well as from New Song. Many years ago, Mercedes Sosa became an inspiration for those who suffer and struggle for justice. She went into exile in 1978, already recognized worldwide as one of the best voices of Latin America. She now lives in her country, but tirelessly tours the world with her music. She has a son, Fabián.

Forced Exile



I was singing in Almacén San José in La Plata on October 20, 1978, while on an artistic tour that also took me to Rosario, Necochea and Buenos Aires.

I felt myself reborn before the audience. Establishing a relationship with my pueblo is essential for me; I listen for their reaction to my songs, filling myself with it to continue living.

This communication compensated me for the "small inconvenience" placed in my way by right-wing groups, and by the authorities, who attacked me for merely singing the songs of my pueblo, songs they consider "leftist," which are, in reality, the fruit of the peoples' pain, their misery, their hope, their work. The poets mold that in words, and we gather their poems in music, so that all mankind recognizes the message of their land, their roots, so buried under the cement of the city and the noise of the workplace.

"Here, We Are the Ones Who Decide."

Not too long ago, I readily agreed to hold a benefit to collect funds necessary to run an elementary school in Lomas de Zamora, a town in the province of Buenos Aires. It was sad to see the conditions of the schools, forgotten by the governments and politicians who apparently had "more important" things to do. Whatever was necessary to continue their operation came out of the teachers' own pockets

The principal of this school asked me to do a benefit which would raise money to cover costs of repairs. I gave my okay and everything was set. But forty-eight hours before the benefit, the authorities called in the principal and asked her if she was crazy. Did she want to ruin her career? Didn't she know I was a "communist"? The woman came to me crying. She wanted to do the benefit at whatever cost, because it was the only way to keep the school open, especially since the province's Ministry of Education was good with "advice" and "threats" but not money.

So the festival didn't come to be, the school probably closed, and the director was most likely declared "unnecessary."

But the night of October 20, another, more serious "inconvenience" would unleash the hate those people have against me, and through me, against everything the pueblo represents. Because, once and for all, what are we if not representatives, ambassadors of our people? When the powerful attack us, they do so because they know that our songs reflect the profound feeling of our pueblo. If it weren't so, they would let us sing even in Teatro Colón*.

So, that night, halfway into my presentation, I noticed "strange" incidents. My agent motioned to me to come closer; at the end of the song, I moved toward her. She offered me a glass of water. Right away, she said, "The police came. . ." So what, I thought; the more the merrier. But the look on her face told me that they didn't buy a ticket, nor did they come to hear me. So I moved closer to the police and asked them straight out: "Can you tell me what's happening?"

"What's happening is that you are singing subversive songs."

"What do you mean, 'subversive songs'? What's that all about?"

"Songs of protest, Marxist. . ."

"But these songs were taped in 1973 and I've been singing them everywhere," I said.

"I don't know what it's like in other places. But *here*, these songs are communist."

"So then, why did you let me get on stage to perform? It would have been easier to prohibit me — and that's it."

"We are the ones who decide what must be done here!"

*Teatro Colón: the most prestigious theater in Buenos Aires.

I thought they would only write a report and cancel the rest of the performance. But the police officers' commands sounded ominous. I thought of one of those Nazi war movies, in which you see the police interrupt a meeting, holding the crowd at gunpoint, and the truth is, *I felt scared.*

All of a sudden, a policeman climbed on stage and started harassing, and I mean grossly harassing, me. I felt so humiliated, enraged. If words could kill, the police would have been dead when I shouted with such hatred: "What are you doing, you shameless cowards!" It was obviously a setup. He was trying to provoke us so that when we fought back they could charge us with "disorder and resisting authority."

They dragged me off stage, separated the men and the women, and boarded everybody onto a bus after ordering all the passengers to get off. Since I was the "most dangerous delinquent" they took me in a police truck. During the trip, the officer who had harassed me moved closer and, ashamed and confused, told me quickly, "I'm sorry, Señora, but it was an order; I had to do it, or else. "

The Tenderness of the Public

We arrived at the Second Precinct Jail in La Plata; Chief Ronconi mistreated us as expected. When I asked for an explanation, he told me that I shouldn't sing any more, that I should stop singing altogether, and he called me "shitty nigger" and other such compliments.

They treated us like criminals; they photographed us, took our fingerprints, and started a file. People were scared; we couldn't go to the bathroom, or speak, or smoke. When one young man talked, the cop punished him so severely that he fell. The kid broke his neck, and was left half-dazed. That scared the cops, who were trying to minimize the incident. I asked them to let a woman with a feverish child go home; they paid no attention.

At six in the morning, the nightmare ended. Slowly, people regained liberty. Stricken, the men started leaving. More animated, the women saluted me, comforted me.

Shortly after that, I gave a presentation in the Teatro Lasalle in

Buenos Aires. Fear took its toll; for the first time in a long time I could see empty seats in the hall. People applauded tremendously, but not so much for my songs. It was as if they wanted to envelop me with their warmth and give me a protective hug. I felt this solidarity, this love, the courage of people who, despite the danger, have come to see me, and I gave myself to the music. I gave the best of myself, forgetting completely the threats.

Weeks later, I had to perform in Cinema Premier, also in Buenos Aires: This time the tickets were sold beforehand, and I arrived at the theater happy, despite the fact that the newspapers refused to advertise the concert and the radio stations wouldn't play my music. I felt happy that day. I arrived at the theater and the people were getting ready to go in when I saw a police patrol: "Again," I thought. But no; again, yes, but in a different way.

"Someone telephoned, warning that there is a bomb inside. We are going to check." They looked for hours. The people were getting impatient; we had to cancel the show, return their money.

What else could I do but leave? They've already bombed Guarany's house. Daniel Chanal, another popular folk singer, was "disappeared*."

And me? I was condemned to internal exile, silence. . .

Testimony collected by Julio Cardenal, Madrid, February 1981
Translated by Marcela Kogan

*On May 21, 1978. The "evidence of crime" found in his house was "a guitar, an artist's workshop, medical and law books, and a lot, a whole lot, of poetry." He is one of one hundred Argentine artists whose return AIDA (International Association to Defend Artists Victimized by Political Repression) has demanded.



Ana Guadalupe Martínez

El Salvador

As a guerrilla commander, Ana Guadalupe Martínez was arrested by the army in El Salvador in July 1976. After being severely tortured, she was released in 1977, in exchange for a wealthy businessman kidnapped by her comrades. Las cárceles clandestinas de El Salvador, excerpted here, is a testimony and a manual for the militant.

Secret Prisons of El Salvador



It was my duty to be silent; I had to direct my thoughts toward the fallen, toward those who had already died seeking to build a new homeland. As I faced each torture, I thought of all the suffering of the people, which add up to something far more painful than what I felt. If I confessed anything, I would contribute to slowing down the process of the liberation of the people.

Added to all this was my worry about a possible pregnancy, because some days earlier, at dawn, Sergeant Mario Rosales, one of our most hated and most cruel hangmen, came to my cell. These visits were so common that it didn't surprise me. This time, however, he arrived with two men, opened the cell, and told me: "Get up and take off your clothes."

"Why?" I asked him. "They just gave them back to me. Besides, I have a bad cough and the cold from the floor is bad for me."

"Take them off, I say," he shouted. "Or do you want these two men to take them off you by force?"

They always sent this Rosales fellow to leave me without any clothes. This henchman must have enjoyed seeing my embarrassment when I started to undress, because ever since I started to take off my own clothes to avoid being manhandled when they did it, he always expected me to.

I undressed slowly. It was very humiliating to me to have to take

my clothes off, listening to their obscenities. When I had taken off almost all my clothes and handed them to him, he shouted, "All your clothes. You don't need to keep any on." I finished undressing. What a terrible feeling, both of rage and impotence, when I was naked.

"Leave," he ordered the other two, and straight away he jumped on me like a tiger on its prey, throwing me to the floor. I hit my head and saw stars for a split second, and he took advantage of this to fall on top of me. When I realized what was happening, I began to struggle. I resisted in spite of being handcuffed.

"It won't do you any good to shout because I'm on duty today," he told me. "I'm the one in charge here this week and no one will come unless I call for them."

My cries were choked by the walls of the cell. I tired very quickly. Taking advantage of my fatigue, he called one of the policemen to restrain me, and so he was able to rape me. They were drunk. There was a disgusting smell of liquor in the cell.

Afterward, I thought that the other one would follow, but luckily he didn't, because the second floor telephone rang and they had to go down to answer it. They closed the door.

I remained on the floor, very demoralized, although I had known that this very thing could happen to me. I sat up and saw that they left my clothes in a corner of the room, and I put them on right away. I was aware of every sound, thinking that perhaps they would come back up. They didn't return.

This same sergeant was the one who took people to Mireya's cell — when she was still there — to rape her. They did it several times. They hadn't managed to rape me in spite of all their attempts. From that occasion on, another of my concerns would be that I was pregnant.

Several days later, when my period didn't come as it was supposed to, I became extremely upset, and I was so overwrought that all I could think of was aborting, if I was in fact pregnant. Just thinking about it made me indescribably desperate.

Solitude and silence are also part of the violence with which they try to demoralize and subdue the kidnap victim. Having to see your executioners' faces, without the little joy of seeing a familiar face, or

hearing a comrade's voice, make the days more painful and desolate.

That is why, when any murmur of voices reached my cell from the neighboring rooms, I listened to them very carefully. I couldn't make out for certain if they were agents of the National Guard, or the other kidnapped victims who were talking.

One day, at the beginning of my second month in captivity, while I sat on the latrine, I heard Valle, almost clearly, talking to someone. From that moment on, I became increasingly anxious to find a way to talk to them.

During the first week of August, when I was looking through the little hole in the steel plate of my door, I saw Marcelo being taken to the second floor, to be interrogated, I think. That was how I found out that they were holding him there. When they brought him back, I began looking for a way to talk to him.

I was very moved, because after more than a month of isolation, I would have someone to talk to, if I could. I knocked on the wall with my knuckles several times and waited for a reply. There was none, but I tried again, and the third time, I got an answer. Then I found the courage to speak and I called "Marcelo!" several times. Someone replied, telling me to talk louder, and then I almost shouted, "Marcelo!" and Valle answered, "How are you, my friend?"

I looked for the place where the sounds could be heard loudest, near the wall of latrines. If I stood on a latrine, I could hear better, I thought. I did that and then we started to talk, with difficulty at first.

"Hello? Are you all right?"

"And you? How long have you been there?"

And he told me that they had knocked on my wall several times before without answer, and that Marcelo had even whistled, several days in a row, and I didn't hear him, because I was weak; besides, I was lying down, and in that position it was more difficult to hear.

Well, to make a long story short, we began to engage in extensive chats, about the most recent events in our personal lives, but I almost had to shout to be heard. Only when there weren't any guards in the corridor could we talk, otherwise they would tell us to keep quiet and they would threaten us.

Translated by Judith Weiss



Gloria Bonilla

El Salvador

Born in 1951, Gloria Bonilla studied sociology in El Salvador. Gloria left her country in 1981, after her house was raided by the military. She continued her studies in the United States. Her master's thesis dealt with Salvadoran immigrants in Washington D.C., where she works as a legal aide.

Talking



January 4, 1988

I saw my friend Alicia this afternoon while I was at the post office waiting in line. We began chatting of things, projects, etc. The book, her deadline. El Salvador. Incredible! It has been almost seven years since I left. I have not been back since.

—Write something, write about your feelings—

It is so difficult to write, to think, to reflect on it. My experience. It is still painful to remember.

I fled El Salvador, leaving behind my family and friends, my undergraduate studies, a job, and all short- and long-term personal goals, in April of 1981 to escape government persecution. In an effort to remain in the United States more than three months at one time, and map out bits and pieces of an unknown future, I was required to change my tourist visa to a student visa. Because the United States recognized then, and continues to recognize today, the government of El Salvador, I have been unable to enter the United States as a refugee, nor can I realistically expect to receive political asylum.

My story does not differ very much from the stories that most Salvadorans tell. I consider myself more fortunate because I did not have to cross the Mexican border and enter the United States illegally. I was also able to maintain a legal status which allows me to continue my education in the United States.

I think, like my parents, I have learned through life quite a bit. My father used to say that we never stop learning in life. He did not go to college. I remember him very much because most of what he knew he had learned on his own. My first recollections of the history of El Salvador were through my father and mother. That history was not in print.

My trip to the United States was sudden, precipitous. I, like many other Salvadorans, finally realized that El Salvador was no longer a safe place to live.

I arrived in Washington D.C. in April of 1981. When I arrived, my good friend, John, was waiting for me at the airport, carrying a heavy coat, assuming I would have no winter clothing. I met John in El Salvador back in the seventies when he was a Peace Corps volunteer. After he came back to the United States, he kept in touch with me, until the political conditions in El Salvador reached serious and dangerous proportions. Then he invited me to come to the United States, an invitation which I did not decline, but which I postponed until I could no longer remain in El Salvador. One day, I called John from Guatemala to let him know I was on my way.

I knew no one in Washington except John, who sheltered me until I was able to support myself. John introduced me to his friends, some of whom are my friends still. As insiders, they helped me to become familiar with the United States. I am grateful for all their help.

A lot has happened since that moment on that spring day in 1981, when I arrived in the United States.

I underwent a metamorphosis. I went from a period of mutiny, in which I encapsulated myself like a larva in a cocoon, to a period of awakening and rebirth. The process was painful and difficult. But I survived. Because I left El Salvador so quickly, I hardly had the chance to reflect on what was happening. When I came to the United States, I carried with me my past, which tied me to people and a land that I had to give up.

There is no medicine to take care of heartache and homesickness — not even here in the United States where there are drugs for almost everything, mostly for pain. I believe we unconsciously or consciously develop methods to cope with those ailments. So, I made up a prescription of my own to help me stay sane and survive in my new

niche. I filled my hours, my days, without respite, so I had no time to think, cry or break.

I forced myself to learn English. I took intensive English courses from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. I worked in the afternoons. Later, I got a full-time job and I enrolled at the university, finished college and went straight for a master's degree in sociology. I did it all in five and a half years.

I did not do it alone, but with the support of friends. I had moments of despair in which I felt lost, with little or no hope. My driving force was that I had no relatives in Washington to look after me. Therefore, I could not afford to lose my most precious commodity, my mind. Some call it pride; for others it is survival instinct. I experienced both.

The United States Immigration and Naturalization Service regulates, controls, and restricts the free access of foreigners to society and subsequently to its benefits. For example, I had a legal status that allowed me to study and remain in the United States as long as I attended school full time. On the other hand, that same status forbade me to work and compete freely for jobs that I thought I was qualified for.

I maintained that legal status as long as I went to school full time. I paid my bills as long as I worked full time. I had no choice. My constant concerns were basic: food, shelter, education, legal status.

A legal status which allows an immigrant to work is an imperative. In my case, the choice was to apply for political asylum or for permanent residence. The best bet was permanent residence.

Political asylum, in the case of Salvadorans, becomes a dead end since U.S. immigration law requires the applicant to provide evidence of a well-founded fear of persecution. A subjective condition, when you think about it. For example, the army did not need any evidence to determine that I was a "suspicious individual," and to break into my home and my parents' home in 1981. Ironically, it is the same subjective reasoning used by a U.S. immigration judge that determines the non-eligibility of a Salvadoran for political asylum. Salvadorans in exile in the United States have been required to all but present a signed affidavit from their persecutors in order to prove their well-founded fear of persecution.

I believe I had good enough reasons to be granted political asylum back in 1981 if I had applied. But a U.S. judge might have disagreed with me, since I did not have concrete evidence of my fear of persecution. Worse, I came from a country whose government is friendly to the United States.

I eliminated the political asylum option from the very beginning. Salvadorans had, back in the early 1980s, little or no chance of having a political asylum application approved; later, it became pointless, since the Reagan administration had invested so much money "democratizing" El Salvador.

I am only an example of what Salvadorans could do if given the chance. In my case, maintaining a student visa gave me access to education, something most Salvadorans have not been able to attain. That is why Salvadorans in the United States hold occupations that require little or no formal education.

I think Salvadorans have tried their best to prove their worth. Our future in the United States does not look promising. Lawmakers had an opportunity to offer better conditions to Salvadorans. The Immigration Reform and Control Act proves it. The United States had a chance to review the law and to review the Central American question, but did not. I believe Salvadorans in the United States have been sentenced without trial. When you think about it, it is not very different from the way our people are treated in El Salvador.



Domitila Barrios de Chungara

Bolivia

Domitila Barrios de Chungara was born in 1937. She had seven children. In 1963, she started to work with the Housewives' Committee which participated in many demonstrations supporting mine workers and the rights of women. Domitila Barrios de Chungara is a survivor of the massacre of San Juan in which hundreds of Bolivian miners were killed by the army. She was also a political prisoner. Her first book, Let Me Speak!, is an account of her life and a testimony of the sufferings of her people. The book excerpted here, Aquí también Domitila, deals with her experiences in exile.

Two Deaths



More or less by October 1980, I'd received a letter from my sister, Marina. She told me that my children were in her care, asked me to return to Bolivia from Europe, and reminded me of my duties as a leader and a mother. "A leader's obligation is to be with her people, for better or worse," she told me, and that by no means did I have to stay out of the country—but that wasn't my intention anyway. She also suggested that I return in the same way I had returned from Mexico: secretly, because we had a lot of work to do in Bolivia.

For me that letter was a great joy because until that date I didn't know anything about my children, and I felt bitter when I thought of them. Of course in the daytime I couldn't give them much thought—busy as I was, giving speeches and working for human rights—but at night I suffered a lot. With my denunciations and the solidarity work, each day I felt the noose around my family's neck was getting tighter. I'd been receiving threats from everywhere. . . : "You have to remember that your children are still in Bolivia," and so on. My comrades also told me that before engaging in these acts of solidarity I ought to secure myself a refugee status, but I didn't do it. I didn't want my family to have to leave for Europe, and I was ashamed of seeking refuge. Just thinking about it made me feel defeated, no?

After a few days, while I was preparing for a press conference, I

received a call from Bolivian comrades in Sweden. They told me they had received a call from Bolivia, that my sister Marina was seriously ill and that I must be prepared for the worst. Of course, at that moment I thought there was no such illness and that my sister was surely wounded or dead — because when someone has been killed, the military dictatorship usually reports: “She died in a lamentable accident,” or “He died in combat.” And I thought she had been assassinated in reprisal for my activity, and also because she was a leader of the Federation of Settlers.

The impact of that news was so great that I became quite faint. And, as if from a dream, I remember that some people pulled me by the hands, slapped me in the face and wanted me to drink some water.

“Drink it, drink it,” they told me. “You have to make an effort, Domi, it’s a question of our country, you have to go on with the accusations. . . .”

But all I was thinking of was my sister, and I said to them:

“My sister, my sister is sick. . . .”

“Yes, Domita, we know, but you have to do it for your sister. You have to be hopeful. And we’ll finish these projects rather quickly; you must try to communicate with your family later.”

Then I went back to the press conference and later went through with the plans for that day.

When I returned to my night’s lodging, I was told that I had received a phone call while I was out speaking, and that the caller would telephone me later. But I was so anxious that I begged the comrades to let me call, and I phoned Sweden. There they told me that I must be strong and that my sister Marina had died.

I admired Marina a lot because she was a great fighter.

Just one month and twenty days later, my father died. And a friend told me afterward that he had suddenly aged because he was so much affected by my sister’s death, because he hadn’t received the letters I had sent him, and because he found out that my children had left for Europe as refugees and he wasn’t sure if they had been reunited with me. He even came to think they had been arrested, no?

He died on January 1, 1981 after a slight accident. He hadn’t the means for the private clinic. My stepmother took him to the general

hospital, but due to the holiday, there were no doctors there. And after waiting all day long for help, he stopped talking, began to snore, and then he died . . .

Although my father loved all four of us sisters equally, I believe that with Marina and me he felt more fulfilled because he succeeded in having us continue the struggle for his ideals. He was always present at our most difficult moments. He pointed out the way for us, but more than anything he encouraged us to go on fighting alongside the people.

Interviewed by Noema Viezzer

Translated by Elinor Randall

The Russell Tribunal*



An impotent jury

The Russell Tribunal met to condemn the crimes and violations of human rights against the national native minorities of the Americas. It was a good experience to participate in this jury. I learned about Indian “reservations.” It also led me to better understand the sufferings of the national minorities.

The jury was composed of several personalities who listened to the accusations of the affected parties. The idea was that the accused also appear, but since the accused were the self-appointed rulers of the countries from which these national minorities originated, not one turned up to defend himself.

The Tribunal had no power to mete out justice. We could only listen to the accusations, and appeal to world consciousness so it would become clear that in some countries — said to be democracies — many injustices are committed against the natives.

Almost everyone denounced racism, which sterilizes women and imposes an alien culture on their children — they denounced discrimination from the rest of society, no? They denounced others owning the lands they had traditionally occupied. They also denounced religious intrusion.

*The Fourth Russell Tribunal on the Rights of the Indians of the Americas, Rotterdam, 1980; named for the philosopher Bertrand Russell.

Among the accusations, which were many, some made a greater impact on me, like those of the Guatemalan Quiché natives. They were represented by two young men who wore masks for fear of repression. They said there were some agents of the CIA and of their country's government in the courtroom, that they were sure they would be killed if they were identified.

They denounced the genocide committed by the Guatemalan army and the assassination of the natives in the Spanish embassy. They said the only survivor of the assassinations had been in the hospital beside the Spanish ambassador; but he, too, was later abducted and killed. The ambassador was told that he would run the same risk if he made any accusations. And when the ambassador left the country, he held that the Guatemalan government was responsible for these crimes.

The Quiché natives demanded guarantees of freedom for their people. This accusation really made an impact.

Another group of natives accused the whites of discovering a uranium mine on their territory, and then taking their lands away from them. They were then taken to work in those mines, and now were dying of some unknown diseases. In accordance with their culture, they had respected those mountains because their gods lived in them; they thought the effects of radioactivity to be a punishment from the gods. They brought films of the zone, of the mountains they considered sacred, and of the people who were dying in the mines. And they demanded that the whites leave them and their gods alone.

The Colombian peasants also made some dramatic accusations. They told about the crimes the natives, especially the leaders, suffered. They said that the Colombian government took their lands away from them and gave priority to the international corporations.

One representative from Bolivia arrived. As the events of the 1980 coup — and the massacre that followed — were still fresh in our minds, there was a great interest in listening to us Bolivians. I don't want to indulge in praising ourselves, but on the day he was to speak, there were more people there than for the other cases. A specialist in native studies spoke from his own position in the racial struggle. He was given enough time. He talked about the culture of

the Incas, but he didn't touch the subject of repression. He didn't say anything against the government of García Meza-Arce Gómez, which came to power in the 1980 coup. He even spoke about the Gueiler government (defeated by the coup), and told us that they all had white last names, foreign last names that are enslaving our country. He said that there was no liberation in Bolivia's independence from the Spanish Crown in 1825, that the war is continuing because only one battle has been lost. But since everyone had a limited time, he was told to finish up. He was upset, no?

Then we chatted:

"I support the culture of the Incas," I said to him, "but why didn't you talk about the crimes of Bánzer and García Meza?"

"It's because I didn't have enough time," he said, "and I was waiting for another chance."

And that might have been possible. . . but in the end there were more than forty-five cases to be heard; everyone wanted to talk. And it wasn't fair that some would be heard and others not. So there was a change in procedure. At the start all had the right to talk for one hour; then they were restricted to half an hour; then to a quarter of an hour, and, at the end, to five minutes. Forty-five cases can't be heard in six days. There was an overload of work. We had to stay there until almost midnight hearing, and then deliberating, the cases. We were there until almost morning.

After the participation of the specialist in native studies, we wanted to be given one more chance to finish the accusation. But the Tribunal told us that the Bolivian who spoke had had his opportunity and enough time, and that the only possibility of completing the denunciation was to wait for the arrival of the other Bolivian representative.

The comrade we were waiting for was from the Federation of Farmers affiliated with the Labor Federation of Bolivia (COB). They found it very hard to leave Bolivia, but we succeeded in delaying their case.

I had begged to quit my post on the jury, arguing that as a victim, I couldn't also be on the jury. I explained my situation and was permitted to act as a witness to the repression, but only for the Bolivian case.

Only minutes before the Tribunal adjourned, the comrade we were expecting arrived. He talked a bit about his organization, focused on the class struggle and denounced what had happened in the military coup — because this comrade had lived through the Army's coup before leaving Bolivia.

Then my statement was accepted as coming from both a witness and a victim. I denounced the fact that I was not allowed to return to my country, and as proof of our repression, I read the "Letter from the women of Caracoles," which denounced the massacre perpetrated by the army in the Caracoles mine in 1980. And when they heard it, there was so much indignation that the people wept and shouted for the guilty to be punished.

One noteworthy thing was that almost all the groups were resentful toward the whites. A Dutch comrade who worked on television drew my attention to this.

"Comrade," he said to me, "I didn't know we had been so wrong. I'm white too, and they're all resentful toward us. But why am I to blame for this thing having happened the way it did? Why so much hate? Why so much rancor toward the whites?"

Then I said to him: "Surely you people must feel uncomfortable. It would be good to make the Tribunal notice this."

"Yes," he told me, "I never would have done that to them. I had rather they lived in a just world. That's why I'm engaged in this work, why I've been traveling to make films, to take photographs showing how those peoples live." That's what he said.

The truth is that we felt bad. I had to make people aware that if it is indeed true that the cause of our maladies started when the European whites came to America enslaving, murdering and robbing us of our lands, it must not be forgotten that there are exploited whites and native exploiters. That there are whites who have suffered the same as we did, and they want us to be freed so they help us, no? I noted that fact and some of the comrades laughed a little, but they accepted it.

On the final night we were left alone for two hours to finish up. Our work during these hours pertained to my group, and we still had to listen to four more nationalities. Then the organizers told us to divide the time we had left among the four. But another problem

appeared: Four more organizations arrived. They said they had come from a long way to state their problems and that it wasn't fair for them not to be allowed to speak. We consulted about this with the comrades of the first four groups and, happily, they understood. So we divided these two hours among the eight groups.

Among them were the papuans who came in dancing, with their typical dress of pure root fibers. They danced very prettily to the sound of their drums. Then the Kurds entered. When the Kurds took the floor they shouted:

"Jury lady, we want to know how our case is going to be solved. How is the jury going to solve it?"

I tried to explain to them that the jury was only a tribune where one could denounce injustice, but that it didn't have any legal power to oblige the rulers to treat their people better. I told them that we were suffering the way they were, no? That we were victims, too, but that we ourselves had to find the solution in our own hands, and that we ought to unite and struggle for justice. That was what I told them.

Maybe many hopeful people came there. It was some jury! Yes. They talked about their problems. Many of them were able to explain them for the first time. . .

Then a native of the Sioux tribe appeared. He was such a plain person that when I saw him I thought I was seeing one of the Bolivian peasants. His face was withered, his hands wrinkled, no? He approached and said:

"Five minutes, jury lady, I want to talk for five minutes. I've just arrived. I'm from the Sioux and I want to make some accusations, too. Why don't they want to listen to me? Only five minutes," he said.

But at that moment all the time was used up. Then we had to beg the translators. Fortunately, they accepted. It was already eleven or twelve at night. . . He was given five minutes, but I believe he said in three minutes what took some longer:

"I'm of the Sioux tribe and proud of it," he said. **"Because my mother taught me to respect women ever since I was a child, because she gave me life. She fed me. My mother also taught me to respect the land, because I cultivate my food from it. She told me to respect the air and not poison it, because the human being lives from it. He breathes. She also taught me to respect the water that ends my thirst.**

And for me the black or the white or the red does not exist. For me they're all my brothers and sisters. I don't hate anyone. And the same way that I love and respect them, I want them to love and respect me and those of my race, and not to exterminate them as they're doing."

He choked on his words and couldn't say any more. He came and embraced me and said to me while crying:

"Jury lady, do us justice; that's all we ask."

Look, it took him less than three minutes to give such a beautiful and profound message.

Hearing those problems from close at hand has also served to clarify our position as a "jury," which was even a little. . . ridiculous. Hearing testimony, but being powerless to help, is even an embarrassment.

Interviewed by Noema Viezzer

Translated by Elinor Randall

Then who died...?



In April of 1981, I was invited to Canada by the Committee for Solidarity with Bolivia, a group of fellow countrymen who organized some quite successful activities. My stay lasted for almost a month and a half.

I traveled for the first time with my daughter, Paolita. The comrades had made efforts to pay for her fare; besides, Paolita didn't want to unglue herself from my side. She was still traumatized because I'd left her in Bolivia.

The Committee for Solidarity had reached agreements with the four miners' unions to prepare an extensive agenda. Included was our participation in the May Day march in Montreal. The workers of the four miners' unions were present and it was a very great march. We were told that we Bolivians were the guests of honor.

My little daughter asked me:

"Where are we going, mama?"

"To a march," I said.

And since she still remembered our marches in Bolivia, she asked:

"Just like in Bolivia?"

"Yes. We're going to have a demonstration just like in Bolivia."

But our customs had been different. In Bolivia when there is a march, whether in celebration or in protest, it is done so

Domitila Barrios de Chungara

boisterously. . .with the union band, some dynamite explosions and shouting all through the streets. And my little daughter surely remembered all that. And when she noticed that there was very little shouting in Montreal, that there were none of those explosions she may have been waiting for, after having turned this over in her mind for a bit, she said:

“Mama. Then who died?”

Interviewed by Noema Viezzer

Translated by Elinor Randall



María Tila Uribe

Colombia

María Tila Uribe was born in 1931. A teacher and a political activist, she was arrested, along with her husband, in 1977, and remained in jail for four years. Later, she lived in exile in Nicaragua. María Tila has three children, and is now back in Colombia.

Notes from Inside



It is not so simple to convey one's thoughts through writing, and I am not a writer. I made myself get into the habit of writing down my experiences in order to relate something about the Colombian prisons and the lives of women political prisoners, as well as my own experience, because many to whom I described life in prison encouraged me to do so.

The subject genuinely interested them. I found among comrades, friends, relatives, and even sympathetic strangers not a superficial curiosity to get a close-up view of something they might know intuitively or guess, but rather a real interest in absorbing such experiences.

I trust that these stories, instead of just being a collection of anecdotes or feelings, can help in creating new and different ways of seeing ourselves and others. I hope that they will be somewhat useful in the struggle to change social relations and will facilitate the establishment of more real and positive bonds between groups of people in order to discover the true meaning of solidarity against injustice in all of its forms.

There is much to tell. I wrote these notes down in any place and at any time, but mainly in the cells. I often sensed the guards' footsteps at night and had to interrupt my work, substituting my pencil with knitting needles.

Many women friends assisted me with surprising ingenuity in smuggling my writings out, piece by piece. However, I lost many notes in the final stages of captivity. I myself burned or destroyed what I had written several times because it was preferable to the risks posed by searches.

In compiling and organizing what remained, I have added a few clarifying notes and have removed some interesting episodes which were difficult to explain for various reasons. I have relived four harsh years of day-in, day-out, month-by-month deprivation. I would like to express my special gratitude to my daughter Esperanza, who carried the heaviest burden of this entire horrible prison ordeal, as well as to my sister and brother, Sofia and Juancho. All of those people and groups who offered us heartfelt support, to whom we political prisoners will always be grateful, also come to mind. It is thanks to them and their solidarity—the best expression of their love for the people—that I remember how, I was able, in the solitude of my cell, to imagine hearing tender voices and, instead of seeing frowns, I peeked through the window grates in search of my right to smile.

To smile and to sing—for the confinement, torture, and hospitalization of many women political prisoner comrades were always followed by a smile. Maybe it's because we were made of optimism and hope in spite of being surrounded by sorrows and being so often choked by tears. We women political prisoners, as I recall someone saying, never resembled a funeral procession.

I hope that this testimony is taken for what it is, an expression of hope for a just and dignified Colombia, free of class distinctions and absurd privileges, and an explicit condemnation of barbaric practices, whatever the struggle faced by the protagonists.

... I was left semiparalyzed. I was anxiously wondering about what would happen to us and to the children, about staying calm, about a thousand things at once. I had gotten up at 6:00 a.m. to prepare some black coffee. My husband Francisco, the former director of the Technical Training Institute, went out to get some bread. When they banged on the door like they were going to knock it down, I was not even properly dressed. I looked out of the window and saw troops everywhere. The entire block was full of soldiers and army trucks.

Francisco was trembling amidst the machine guns. I saw his face clearly in the tentative rays of sunlight which greeted the morning, just as I saw the arrogant expressions of those who held him, and the frightened people who witnessed the spectacle from the windows facing the street.

Many Colombians would come to know what it feels like to be raided (and thousands more would come to know it during the subsequent government of Señor Turbay Ayala). When asked about it, I remembered that my first impulse was to run away—not out of fear, which in many cases vanishes right at the moment of danger, only to reappear later. I wanted to flee because everyone knows that prison engenders destruction, bitterness, confusion, and melts away achievements and hopes. . . .

I naively went running up to the roof, for nearby I saw the bursts of rifle fire from the neighboring rooftops. When the pounding at the door became louder, I descended quickly to the telephone. What I have never been able to understand is how I dialed the right phone number, to let people know. Then I opened the door.

We were taken into custody. . . . Francisco was pushed straight toward the living room. They shut the door. They looked at me as if I were the intruder. Two, three, four of them came in. One of them motioned to me like a cowboy in a Western, jerking his head up and yelling, "Move it!" while going up the stairs. Many others in the squad passed me. When I got upstairs, I saw them knock down everything that they found in their path.

Then they ordered me to go to the room containing a portion of the library that Francisco had managed to save. There lay the manuscripts of my father, Tomás Uribe Márquez. They were extremely valuable documents for the history of the class struggle in our country, including information about the 1928 Banana Plantation Strike and the subsequent massacre, correspondence with María Cano, his cousin; my mother's letters containing political information, and many other important things of these times.

One of the soldiers calmly began his inspection by taking books and documents down from the shelves, leafing through them or reading titles. He threw several on the floor and the rest out the window into the inner courtyard. He was irrational. You could hear the noise of the books hitting the floor of that patio twelve feet below. The bindings and

folders were broken, the pages of documents that had been carefully preserved for years fell like garbage. It had started to rain . . .

The interrogation began right there. They thought that I had some kind of weapon and tore open my handbag. They demanded "all" of my ID cards, but all I had was my own. Nothing was left after the raid. They took all of the "evidence" and several objects which they liked, even unlikely things such as a framed picture of my grandmother, a little old box with my personal letters, my father's political diary and his study of agrarian issues, things that belonged to my children when they were very young, Francisco's unedited writings, books, magazine clippings, records, cassettes, a small alcohol stove and the mattress. They destroyed our home, but not the unity of our family which, although we were separated, always remained intact.

Four hours later they moved me to an army base at Puente Aranda. I agonized over the fate of Francisco, who had stayed behind with the soldiers at the apartment. When we said goodbye, I cast a fleeting glance at him; possibly he was thinking of my fate. We exchanged quizzical looks, but each was absolutely certain of the other's stance.

During the ride in the jeep I thought: The city is deceptive. They might have followed us a lot without it being obvious, or someone might have "made a deal" leading to our arrest. And now the soldiers were going to score points for it.

But I, having this false sense of security that is so dangerous for those who dare to think and act against the powers that be, told myself: eight days and my situation will be straightened out; this bad time will have passed. What an illusion! For I had not yet experienced what it means to be in the hands of military "justice."

All of this happened on the day following my arrival in Bogota. It was March 24, 1977.

After the meticulous paperwork, the humiliating and threatening glances and comments from several individuals, they locked me in a room. I calculated that it was 2:00 p.m.: they had also "seized" my watch. Interrogation began in that room. They came in one at a time, hooded; I did not rest for three or four hours, as they themselves noted.

Thus I spent the day, that night, the following day and . . . I lost track of time. Only later was I able to figure out that this interrogation

lasted until the following Monday. I remember that at some point I saw the light fade into the distance, or I fainted, overcome by exhaustion—they would bring cold water to throw on my face—and I also remember a voice that would wake me up: “Get up! The captain’s coming!” I asked how long I had slept and the man told me: “Two hours. You’ve slept quite a bit.”

With no food or water, the hunger you feel the first day is not the worst of it, nor the sick feeling that follows, nor the vomiting at the end. Most worrisome is controlling your nervous tension in the face of threats and provocations. Especially when faced with the worst poison: “the good guys” who project trust, demonstrate “friendship,” and pretend to understand and, indeed, identify with the ideals of justice. A large percentage of denunciations and frame-ups, of incriminations and self-incriminations result from the work of the “good guys.” They come to “save” the prisoners from the clutches of the “bad guys.” They are experts in adulation, playing on one’s vanity, giving one the benefit of the doubt, and manipulating interviews, combining lies with true statements. In my case, this was the *modus operandi* of two of the interrogators.

I saw the first enter with his hand at his waist, corpulent in the shadows of the room. He was wearing a black leather jacket. He had a soldier bring a not-very-large cardboard box and put it on the small table; the soldier then left. He locked the door and approached, with slow, heavy steps, the only chair in the room, leaving us face-to-face; I was sitting on the bed, and the table was between us.

Others had already been through, always hooded, always jotting down my responses in their notebooks.

Through the holes in the hood I caught a glimpse of something that inspired fear: the hole for the mouth revealed large teeth, reinforced with gold above and on the back side, which I gradually discovered the more he shouted at me.

There were two main lines of questioning: where was my son Mauricio? and who was participating in the literacy work?

He began by emptying the contents of the box on the little table, some fifty small portraits of my son, all identical.

“Where is this son-of-a-bitch? You can send word to him to give