

Of Earth and Corn: Salvadorans in the United States

by Sylvia J. Rosales

In February 1985 Doña Carmen Romero was a third grade teacher in southern San Miguel province in El Salvador. It was then that her husband, Carlos, a member of the local textile factory's union, was abducted and killed by Salvadoran National Guard death squads. His body was found with signs of torture near a river. "We barely could recognize his features. His facial skin had been removed with sharp knives," Doña Carmen recounts. Soon, she and her two sons Pedro and Raul, ages eighteen and sixteen, were receiving death threats. About two months after the incidents the boys slipped across the border and flew to Washington, D.C. The "coyote," or smuggler, charged \$2,500 to bring them into the country. Their trip was paid for by relatives and neighbors. Doña Carmen followed her sons a few weeks later.

Today, the Romeros share a \$600-a-month two-room Washington apartment with Doña Carmen's hometown friend and her husband. Fearful of relating their past experiences, all five face the difficult task of finding menial jobs that many Americans will not accept, while they live in constant fear of being deported. "Still," Doña Carmen says, "it is better than living with death after you. Life in a war zone is not easy."

Doña Carmen is not alone. Only 94,000 Salvadorans lived in this country prior to 1980. In just eight years the number has increased dramatically: today, over 800,000 Salvadorans in the United States are witnesses of past tragedies of governmental repression and the search for refuge. Doña Carmen shares her sadness with 200,000 other victims of the war now living in the Washington metropolitan area.

Unable to survive at home, they seem similarly unwelcome in the United States. The U.S. government does not officially recognize Salvadorans as refugees primarily because it gives substantial amounts of military aid to El Salvador. To grant refugee status to Salvadorans would expose the embarrassing situation that such military aid is largely responsible for an estimated thirty percent of Salvadorans fleeing their homes.

Happiness remains a hope for many Salvadorans in the United States. But for the majority the hope is hard to achieve. Unable to use their technical skills, suddenly placed in a foreign culture with a foreign language, longing for their loved ones left behind, they often



Salvadoran children, like this child, are among the 150,000 in metropolitan Washington who are seeking safe haven in the U.S. Photo by Rick Reinhard

awake from nightmares of the tragedy which has twisted their lives. Laments Doña Carmen,

We miss our flowers, the landscape, the air . . . and our friends, the church, the priest, and the *casa comunal* [community house], the *pan dulce* [traditional sweet bread] we Salvadorans used to have with our neighbors or workfellows every afternoon . . . It's hard to learn new values and customs which are totally foreign to you. And, of course, we don't want to give up ours.

While such problems are faced by many newcomers to this country, for Salvadorans the transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar is even more difficult. Fleeing a war that they hope will one day end, many Salvadorans in the United States long for the day they can return to their country.

It is with this hope in mind that Salvadorans build their communities here. *Pupusas* (Salvadoran tortillas stuffed with meat and cheese), chicken and pork *tamales*, *atole* (a Salvadoran refreshment drink) and countless other Salvadoran traditional dishes are found in almost every Salvadoran Washington household. Many Salvadoran women still *palmean* (handpat) tortillas to be cooked on their *comales*, the clay stove-tops used in rural El Salvador and now adapted to electrical or gas stoves. There are at least three Christian-based communities of Salvadorans in the Mount Pleasant area alone. Such communities, whose religious practices are based upon an interpretation of the Gospels as calling for social change, have been the main target of official persecution in El Salvador since 1970. Today, men, women and youngsters meet every Sunday after Mass at a church in northwest Washington to maintain their identity and faith as a community and as part of a suffering people in search of happiness and justice. Salvadoran children play the *piñata* at every birthday party, and Salvadoran music is never missing from any family or community celebration.

But a new darkness has descended upon this community since the recent immigration law of 1986. Most refugees from El Salvador arrived after the cut off date for eligibility in the government's amnesty program for undocumented aliens, and it is estimated that only ten percent of Salvadorans will be eligible. Furthermore, it is likely that at least some of this small percentage will be distrustful of official intentions, fearing that their personal information can be passed to Salvadoran authorities and be used against relatives remaining in El Salvador. "It is a war," says Doña Carmen's son, Pedro, "and the U.S. is involved, and we the poor are always unprotected and persecuted." As a result, many Salvadorans find themselves pressed back into the terror-filled days of walking a precarious bridge between survival and death. "Deportation to war is closer to us than a year ago," one Salvadoran recently stated.

For the lucky ones who are not caught and deported, mere survival has become more trying. The threat of sanctions against employers hiring undocumented workers as well as general discrimination is adversely affecting the already suffering Salvadoran community, which lacks protection under the law. According to reports received by the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN) in Washington, many Salvadorans have been fired since the law has gone into effect, and those who have jobs are finding many employers increasingly willing to exploit them. Abuses exist against Salvadorans in housing as well. For example, at least fifty Salvadoran

tenants in two buildings in the Adams Morgan neighborhood have been living in deplorable housing conditions for many months; yet when the occupants demanded repairs the landlord threatened to have them deported. "The new law is just legalizing abuses and making life for these refugees an endless tragedy," says Jose Romero, a community organizer on CARECEN's staff.

Doña Carmen summarizes it most succinctly when reflecting on life for Salvadorans in the United States:

The active and well-fed death squads in El Salvador and the abuses we are encountering here every day in the United States after this law are indeed changing our life. But we keep believing; our hope is there. We will get out of this bad dream.

She claims that Salvadorans' pride and cultural identity helps them to put up with the difficulties. The scene in numerous Salvadoran communities across this country supports her claim: Salvadorans still cook their *pupusas*, their kids still beat the *piñatas*, Sunday Mass is held sacred and the Christian-based communities are growing. Salvadoran music, full of sadness and hope, sings louder, and mothers invite their babies to sleep with the traditional Salvadoran lullaby:

Hush little baby, Pumpkin head;
Coyote will eat you
If you don't go to bed.

"Death didn't destroy us in El Salvador; we can survive this other nightmare now," Doña Carmen says before adding quietly, as if revealing a secret: "We Salvadorans are made of earth and corn, eternal life."

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Suggested reading

Argueta, Manlio. *Cuzcatlan, Where the Southern Sea Beats*, trans. Clark Hansen. New York: Vintage Books, 1987.

_____. *One Day of Life*, trans. Clark Hansen. New York: Vintage Books, 1983.

Dalton, Roque. *Las Historias Prohibidas del Pulgarcito*, trans. Bill Brow. Mexico: Siglo XXI Editors, 1985 [1974].