

CECILIA—Transcript

My name is Cecilia Guadalupe Sosa Pereira, I was born and grew up in San Salvador. I remember I was very young when I started witnessing difficult situations that I could not comprehend.

I was in fifth grade, was barely 11 years old. A peaceful student demonstration was coming by the Social Security building in San Salvador, when all of a sudden they were surrounded. And they were enclosing the area from many points. That is, you tried to leave the area through one side and you couldn't, through another and you couldn't. So we stayed there, petrified, in a position where we could see everything that was happening there.

They began throwing canisters of tear gas at them and paint. Something that would explode and leave them marked so that even after running away, they could be identified. And then they began shooting at them and killed many people there. It was horrible, just horrible.

And when people began to disperse, you could see a suitcase here, a purse there, books, shoes. And later when most people had left or managed to escape, a truck came by picking up the wounded who were still alive. They were putting them inside a truck and were beating them. Later there was even a tank that went by crushing many people who were still hurt or dead. It was horrible. There was blood everywhere.

On top of that, there was this feeling of insecurity or lack of trust, and not being able to talk about it. For the fear of becoming a suspect, you see, because of the comments you made. I think I understood that; I was conditioned to think that from a very young age.

Sometimes we would travel on interstate buses and had to stop at military checkpoints. And sometimes they would ask us to get off the bus, and then we all had to get off. Or soldiers would get on the bus and go down the aisle identifying people. It really depended on their impression or on the people's reactions. At least that's what I started seeing and understanding, why they were taking that person or the other. They would say, you get off, and you, and you. And they would line them up on the street and tell the bus driver to go. And he had to leave or else they would kill him right there. Later, when the bus was on its way, one could hear the gun shots.

After seeing all of this, I understood one couldn't ask any questions or else, would they take me too? Or would they take my mom, or my grandmother, or my dad—whomever

was with me at the time. I think I learned that at a very early age. The fact that you couldn't speak. Even with my parents I couldn't talk about those things.

I think it was some kind of survival mechanism.

It was after that massacre—because what happened was really a horrible massacre—I also experienced something that marked me. The teacher I had at the time, my fifth grade teacher, was a person who loved teaching, who enjoyed being a teacher, who always had a good outlook on life. A positive outlook. She smiled and loved teaching. And then all of a sudden she didn't show up for a couple of days and came back dressed all in black. And the rest of the year... I think the massacre happened in July, from what I remember. And after that I never saw her smile. And I never saw her dressed in another color that wasn't black. And you know, we were so little that we wouldn't comment, but eventually I realized that one of her two children had been at that protest. One of them had been killed there. That is, she never told us about it, nobody told us, but you know when a person changes. And well, she was never the same.

When I was in middle school, I started comprehending other things as well. Many of my classmates disappeared. When we got to ninth grade, they were no longer with us, so... We knew some of them had been killed, others were able to leave the country with their families, and others were simply disappeared. That is, when I got to my first year of high school, half of my classmates from seven grade were gone. We didn't know what happened to them, we didn't know where they were. It was such a feeling of insecurity. Like I was telling you, it became part of your daily life. The only thing I knew is that I would leave my house in the mornings unsure of whether I would come back at night.

Back then I was already running. I began my training. It helped me process things, to let off steam. But I wasn't sure what I was processing or what I was trying to let go of. All I knew is that when I ran I could feel it, and then I would run faster and stronger. I was able to let go of the pain that way.

Sooner or later, you would find yourself in the middle of those confrontations and then you felt people bleeding next to you who had been shot, and they would die right there next to you. The war had already been declared, it just wasn't recognized. And yes, we knew it five or seven years before that.

That's when the strikes started happening more frequently. Teacher and doctor strikes. Transportation strikes because of how expensive the gas was. People protesting against high taxes and low salaries.

My school was also really close to the guard and national police headquarters, where many confrontations took place. There was this thing they did, a kind of blockade. They would surround the entire neighborhood and then, no one could get in or out. At that moment, they would start their inspection, doing searches in every home, house to house,

rounding people up until they met each other in the center. And in that process they would arrest a lot of people, they would take them away or kill some. Or sometimes, a confrontation would break out.

And during the three times that there was a blockade in my neighborhood, I was coming back from somewhere and couldn't get back to my house. I had to wait around, wasting time, until they finished and removed all the checkpoints. And twice, I couldn't get back home all night. I had to stay in the homes of strangers.

Finally back home the next day, I found my mom had spent a sleepless night crying, worried sick for me. But she wouldn't say anything, she was just happy to see me alive, and she would hug me and I would tell her, "I couldn't come home last night, they had a checkpoint."

Maybe it was that fear parents had of what one could be involved in. Sometimes it was better not to know.

Because studying where I was, was already a crime. Everyone between 10-12 years of age and 35 were the government's enemy. So in 1980, they came many times by the National Institute. They would target you, associate you with them, depending on where you were studying, what kind of information you may or may not have. Those who were deemed suspicious, who they were looking for and found, they would take them and kill them. They would torture them or kill them right there.

And later the teachers too. They were also disappeared. I had only one professor that year, only one teacher who lasted one or two months. All the other teachers didn't last for more than a week. And they killed many of those teachers. With time we learned from someone or heard rumors. Yes, they killed him. They took him from the parking lot.

There were departments that were best to avoid because you knew that the entire department was labeled "red". And you didn't want to go by that department in order to avoid getting associated with that department. The Law School, the Department of Economy, anything that had to do with agronomy and food for export. That is, when you entered or exited the school, it was best to go all the way around to avoid going in front of those departments because you knew they were monitored all the time. And that was the kind of stuff that was taking place.

When I went to school there, I had some team mates who were perhaps a little bit more involved. You couldn't know at what level, but they were. And after a sport competition, two or three of my team mates were disappeared. From then on I started feeling or recognized, that I was being followed too. That the whole team was being followed. Apparently, it was because they felt we were getting trained to get in the physical condition to go to the mountains and carry heavy equipment, or to train the guerrilla living in the mountains.

Whichever it was their perspective or because of direct association, the thing is that we were being followed. And two or three of my team mates disappeared in a matter of one or two months.

Around that time we had a competition, we were running from San Salvador to Santa Ana. And there was a long stretch of highway that was on the hillside of a volcano. The volcano after erupting had left a landscape covered with black rocks, everything burnt in its path. That area is what we call El Playón.

The thing is that we were going by during a relay race. That is, we would run three to four miles and then someone else would take over. Competing among groups. But no one had realized that that area of El Playón was where they left the dead bodies.

We were going through that area, running on the main highway, but what caught our attention wasn't the bodies but the great number of vultures there. We stopped to drink some water, buy coconut water. And then all of a sudden someone screamed. We went to see what was going on and saw all those birds and then realized that there was a body lying there, and then another, and then another, and then another. There were tons of dead bodies out there. And they didn't seem real because they were swollen like a blown up bladder. That is, they were already in a state of decomposition. And you could still see the bruises and contusions. Sometimes they were missing fingers, or had burns. You could see their burns and bruise marks. But like I'm telling you... I could only see them as dummies, or stuffed dolls. I really couldn't process it as something real.

And that was the most recent one, which was on its first days or state of decomposition. But if you went further in, you could find them in different states. And there were others that already had worms in them. And then further in... the vultures were eating these bodies. I was paralyzed, really. It was like a whole beach, covered in dead bodies, one next to the other. And I know many people who later went there looking for their loved ones, wanting to find their family members or disappeared people.

I can only remember that experience as if it were a movie now. I haven't yet processed it or have been able to take it in. It's like a painting to me. It wasn't real. It wasn't real because I can't comprehend that that could've been a body, that something like that happened to a body. And I honestly don't know when I'll begin to process that part. Because if I think about it too much, I mean, I could've ended there myself.

One day when I was training. I was already living by myself. I had moved with some friends close to the university. I trained every day, would go running. One of those days when I was running, they stopped me and took me. But those were definitely death squad members. It was a group of seven.

And they beat me a lot. They wanted me to give them information about my other team mates. And I was very clear. First, because I actually didn't know anything and is hard to know much in those circumstances. But just the same, even if I knew something... That is, I didn't want somebody else's blood to run because of me. It was a decision I made thinking that day I was going to die. That was the day that I had been waiting for, that could've happened to me time and time again. It was something like adrenaline and shock at the same time.

They left me there, taking me for dead. What I remember is that when I woke up I was bleeding, I couldn't... I didn't know where I was. I finally managed to get up and went home. I shut myself in that house. Only two or three people knew what had happened to me.

When I finally recovered and regained strength, all I knew is that I had to leave. I was leaving, I was leaving and that was that. That was my main motivation for leaving El Salvador.

It is a human right: to meet people, have relationships, have friendships, or people who fill your life and with whom you can share things. And to grow up under those conditions, under those circumstances has been very confusing for me. That has been for me and continues to be, the worst trauma. The idea of what a human life is worth. And the impact that that has had in my life, as a person, or the value of my own life. How much I'm worth and my right to exist.

That is, you carry on as if your life has already been sentenced. You carry on thinking, it didn't happen this time, I survived but maybe next time I won't. And you continue to live, living just one more day because you woke up, because you can think, well maybe I'll survive once again. But that feeling that you don't have a tomorrow. Or the horrible trauma to know that many of the people you knew died. And those that I didn't know as well, but you witnessed their deaths. And it was one more life for a dream that they had, whether it was a political dream to see some kind of social change in our country. Or maybe they weren't involved, or maybe they didn't even know but had a dream like any other human being has, of studying, of working, of having a family.

So the profound impact that that has had on me is, first, a matter of survival... But I also internalized a belief that I had to do something really big. As if I had to do something that was worth all of those people who died in front of me. As if owe them my life. It's a trauma that has had a hard impression on me. That I don't know... As if everything that I do is not enough, it has to be something much bigger. It has to be something that for me is what a human life is worth. So then, it is also a matter of having a kind of suicidal disposition, you see, because you stop taking care of yourself. You leave your own dream behind, you and your life, you and your own development as a person, as an individual.

About ten years ago I began to process all of this and it was only 4 or 3 years ago that I finally came to the realization that probably what I have to do is heal, find my own space, and live my own life. That all those people died so that I can live in a different society, in a different system. And for the conviction that I am alive, and that I have a right to a tomorrow...

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