

CESAR—Transcript

We are from a very poor family, a family of fourteen. My mother and father would sell newspapers. They would get up at one to get newspapers from San Salvador. They would arrive to a city called Mejicano that was 30 to 20 miles away. I'm not sure. They would get back around six, six thirty and give us newspapers for us to start selling them. That's how we grew up. We didn't have a childhood, really.

What I remember is that I began to work with my dad at the age of five. I already had the responsibility of selling newspapers. We lived in poverty all the time. I didn't study much, only up to third grade and that's how I reached adolescence. I began working in a car shop but already had my needs, a need for my own things. So I left and started working in a textile factory. That is, I started making six colones per day.

Where I worked they were very authoritarian. I worked, used to get a lot of production for my supervisor but they wouldn't pay me directly. They paid my supervisor. And well, I saw a lot of injustice. Once, after having worked there for over a year, they told me that I had to start from zero, as if I was a new worker, in order to avoid paying me what I deserved after that year. And I said no, that I didn't agree and that they could keep their job.

Well, I carried on, but the difficulties in El Salvador had already started. That was around 76. People were demanding, for example, better prices for basic needs.

Yeah, around that time to be against the government's politics in our country... If only, if you protested... Well, thousands of people, many of my friends were killed. They would capture them alive, take them away, and you didn't hear from them again. Or find them decapitated. That's how everything began. That's why I had to get involved, because of the political situation. I didn't have a choice.

At night they came for people--the death squads--if they knew that you were protesting. It could be the national police, the national guard, or the PH, as we called the policia de hacienda and the army... And well, the army thought everyone was a subversive. Anyone who didn't agree with the government's politics was either a guerrilla or subversive, same thing. One or the other. Like I was telling you, you would end up taking risks. I had to get involved organizing people so they could demand for their rights like those we have in this country.

That's how it was until the civil war exploded, but it didn't happen from one day to the next. It was a long process.

Once they came to search my house because they had captured me. I had a grandfather who was 103 years old. He's dead now. And they threatened to beat him, questioning him about where the buried weapons were. I don't know, my grandfather said. I don't know anything. Because he didn't know anything. One couldn't go around saying anything for security reasons, your own and your family's.

He used to talk about 1930 when Farabundo Marti... He said that they would take people away, that they would bring people from other towns to San Salvador and one could hear the firing squads at night. The next morning you could see tons of dead people by huge trenches, and they would throw them in there. 30.000 died back then. That is, people fought but they weren't well prepared. That's why they failed. The war in 76 was different.

It was hard, the war. We had to leave the country. I left because they tortured me both times I was arrested. I was about 22 years old.

And why did they arrest you?

For being a member, a member of the FMLN, but I wasn't a guerrilla. I was an organizer. I was an organizer like any other person that forms unions, participates in union organizing. That is, creating the bases. A president, a vicepresident, the secretary... You know, what a union is made of.

Then one could make proposals about what kind of demands to make, based on people's daily experiences at work. That was all. And there were other people who went there to give them political orientation. That was a different thing. But it was a democracy and one has the right, has the right to put one's opinion on the table, right?

But one couldn't say anything outside of the government's line because then one was labeled a guerrilla, or subversive. And that's how they disappeared thousands of people.

Maybe you have heard of Archbishop Romero. Well, one day after his funeral we went out to protest and to put banners on the streets but that was also illegal. Well, an armoured car came. There were other people who were supposed to be on the lookout for army convoys. They were up higher but didn't tell us. So the army came, and we didn't get the chance to run away. We didn't have time. I was hanging up a banner... There was dirty river below us and as the armoured car came by, shooting at us, we jumped into the river. All five of us. They kept us there for about two hours, shooting at us and us trying to decide what to do. We couldn't do anything and finally got out. That's when the army came, the policia de hacienda. They beat us. Beat us badly. And they were asking us for weapons. Dunking our heads in that dirty water. They killed one of my friends... A bullet

from a G-3 hit him and he was bleeding badly, practically crying as he was saying that we should turn ourselves in. They're going to kill us, he said. But they're going to kill us anyway, I said.

The thing is that they came down and tortured us right there for about two to three hours, hitting us. Then they took us to the barracks and held us prisoners for ten days. They wouldn't let us sleep, kept us shackled to this big concrete slab, all night lying there. To the one who was crying for us to turn ourselves in, they kept him shackled. They put weights on his testicles. His neck and hands tied up. Sitting there to sleep against the prison cell's door. And we were like that for ten days. They would arrive early in the morning, threatening to kill us, that they were going to cut us in pieces. There was this one guy, more aggressive, an assassin. Oh, you sons of this and that, he would say, my officer doesn't let me cut you up. But he would charge his weapon and put it right against our heads. I'm gonna kill you, you bastards! He would humiliate us, curse at us.

But then, since they didn't have any evidence. I mean, they would make you say things to stop the beatings, extrajudicially. Not lawfully. That means when you take the blame under torture. We accepted whatever charges they gave us but when it was time to go to court, we said that we had confessed under torture. It was against the law, so they let us free. And they took us to a city prison, but when we were finally set free, we weren't at ease anymore because we knew that they would kill us if we stay put. I didn't go back home. I was sleeping in one place or another. Running away all the time. If you stayed home, they would monitor you for sure. If you let your guard down, it was certain they would come for you at night.

And the second time was the same thing. That was around 1984, in November, during independence day in El Salvador. I was organizing a protest with the committee of the Mothers of the Disappeared and for political prisoners. They asked me if I could help organize the security, so that nothing would happen to them. That is, I had to help them flee in case of an attack. We mapped an exit strategy to protect the women, you see.

Eight days later, I was leaving work. It was a Friday about six in the morning. I had been working when outside I saw some suspicious men dressed in civilian clothes. One here at the door, the other there, one across the street. And I'm on my toes, you know. I was with a friend. And I told myself, if I run back inside they're going to kill him and he has nothing to do with this.

And then, I got on the bus that would take me home. But a few miles down the road I saw a van behind us, a Volkswagen. They got on the bus. I mean, the bus stopped, and they took me off the bus. They got me in the van and they put a "capucha" on me, as they call it. It's a plastic bag so that I would tell them who I was. I don't know anything, I said.

The capucha, yes. It's a plastic bag, and they put it over your head, they tie it up and then you can't breathe. It sticks against your face and you feel like you're choking. Then they

beat me. They took me to their barracks and there they tortured me. For a long time, for fifteen days. I could hear people screaming at night.

They would take me out, someone would come and put a G-3 against my head. Shoot without a cartridge. They beat me and didn't let me sleep for over 24 hours. They asked me 40 questions that I memorized my first day there. Because they would say, look, you know this and that. And I said, I don't know anything. Look you... I don't know anything. They would take me out and ask me to point people out, at the university, so that I could mess their lives up. And I would say, I don't know anyone.

And so. Fifteen days later they took me to the Marión penitentiary, where all the other political prisoners were. And we declared ourselves on hunger strike because right around that time, President Duarte, a civilian, he had spoken at the UN saying that he was going to give general amnesty to all the political prisoners.

We went on hunger strike. But I was there only for 23 days because my family... The military tribunal bribed them. Told them if they were willing to pay 1.200 colones, they would set me free. That is, they were corrupt officials from the army. That is, one would pay to be freed although they didn't have any evidence against us. And those who didn't have money, stayed behind bars. It was my sister who paid the fee.

Because of all the torture, they damaged four of my vertebra. They tortured me in many ways. They gave me electric shocks in my rectum. They tied my testicles to a rope and a bucket at the end of it, and they would add stones to it as a form of torture. Gave me electric shocks in my ears, on my tongue which would roll up. And they applied the "plane" on me. The plane is when they tie you up from your hands and feet and they spin you around, and there are cops all around you beating you up, torturing you.

They applied the submarine. That's when they submerge your face in dirty water, in the toilets. I also saw other people who had their nails pulled out. Just like how you see it in the movies. They would bury them with ants. They would throw salt on their wounds after they tortured them. I went through much of that. Thank god that I'm 100% fine now. But yes, I witnessed all of that.

Well, I left El Salvador when... About the fifth is when I left for the States. Around January 17, 1985, I came through Chihuahua, to Texas. From Texas I came to New York. I was in New York but was arrested for being an illegal. I was in jail for 2 months and six days. For being an illegal, undocumented. Until my sister paid a 1,000 dollars bail. I had to apply for political asylum, fill all the paperwork for that. But since Ronald Reagan was saying back then that there were no political refugees, only economic refugees... After all, it was he who was financing the war in El Salvador.

I never wanted to come here, but I was having serious back problems. My column used to go numb when I first arrived. Because I had four vertebra that were putting pressure on

my asiatic nerve. That's why I decided to come here, and I was able to get that under control after seven years of therapy with a chiropractor. Lots of exercises to strengthen my column, and it healed. But I never wanted to come here. I knew very well how hard life is here for the immigrant; it's not easy. And always having to deal with the discrimination...

But I stayed in this system because of my children, to give them a better future because in El Salvador, there is no future there for them.

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