

**MARIO—Transcript**

I got involved for my own benefit in the Catholic Church in the neighborhood where I lived, where I grew up as a young man. I did this not so much with the intention of learning about religion but, to be honest, because there were many young women there I liked. I went of personal interest, but then I got to learn a thing or two about theology of liberation. I probably was about 15 or 16 years old. A kid really, who is after girls at that age.

But what happened was that I learned something else. I started seeing what was around me with different eyes, because around the same time I started studying Marxism, Leninism, and all of that. And of course, I started helping the priests and the church by going into poor neighborhoods and practicing popular education.

During that time, I became really fond of one of the nuns. She was already connected to the church and the guerrilla movement. She was a part of it, you know? But she died in one of the towns she was in charge of.

There was a group of youngsters who were on a spiritual retreat. They had 2-3 weapons but they weren't getting trained or doing anything out of the ordinary. They were in the San Roque Chapel which is north from San Salvador. They were in this chapel that was in a crevice, inside a ravine. There were 18 to 20 young people there and if I remember well...

Well, none of them came out alive.

Actually, for me the war had already begun. It wasn't a formal war because it wasn't a confrontation between two armies, but the period I lived under was war-like. It was a war between the government's military and the oligarchy against the people who wanted to organize themselves. Those people were not dying or being displaced out of sheer bad luck. It was a war imposed on them, but in a different way.

How do we define, then, that era of repression? My people were being repressed because it was a whole strategy of the oligarchy to silence people at any cost. We were living a different war.

Many people from the countryside would come to San Salvador seeking refuge because they were getting killed in their own towns. They were being displaced. They would

leave in great numbers, retreat in a hurry. And they would come seeking refuge in the churches and the university until the military abandoned their region, their town. Then, they could go back. But the military would not abandon the region until we reported how the military had invaded such and such town and committed such atrocities, or had captured people, or had done this and that thing. Meanwhile, people lived in our classrooms and needed support.

As I was telling you, one could not continue to be blind to the plight of women, children, old men, and pregnant women arriving at the University looking for refuge. They would take over our classrooms to live there. They used our bathrooms and we had to be respectful of their space. And there was always one or two students who didn't like this, you know? But these people weren't there at the university as tourists. They were there because they were running away from what was happening in their towns.

That's when I started having a better understanding and got much more involved.

It was during this time that I joined a particular organization, the People's Liberation Front, with a much greater level of responsibility. I was put in charge, for example, of the street security during protests, because there was a lot of repression against protests as well.

The worst kind of repression happened when the campesinos came out to protest. The farmers usually organized big marches because this or that town had been destroyed by the military. Or because they had gone in to capture people. And maybe because I was from San Salvador, it became routine to organize a defense strategy for a march of students and union workers. But to prepare for a march of campesinos, joined usually by people from the city, well, now we're no longer talking about 10 thousand people but 70 thousand...

But by that time we already knew that in such or that building the police or national guard would set post, we had them already spotted. They were mostly snippers on tall buildings and on the streets. And when we noticed that they were ready to meet us in battle, it was because they had figured out our analysis of the situation, and that's when people would stampede into the churches and university, seeking refuge.

Talking about churches, also... Aside from becoming a refuge when the police shot at us, killed people, churches also became a place where people could get trained. We would teach people how to return to their homes, what routes to take, what streets to avoid. So in reality we were giving them already an introduction on self-defense. How to look around them, but also how we could organize the next protest, how to be situated.

Just as the Salvadoran army was trying to defend the "governability," in quotes, of what they considered was the government, the guerrilla army also had the necessity of defending those people who had suffered repression for years. The people were no longer

forced out of their territory then, they didn't have to run because they had a guerrilla army come to their aid and confront the military.

Militias were then created. The militias were made up of the people themselves, who learned how to make molotov cocktails, to cook for the militias, right? The people became observers, looking out for the military's movements. It is then that the guerrilla becomes an army because it already has a territory under control. We have territory to defend, and we already have an army.

It has been calculated that the number of people involved--towards the end of the war--the number of guerrilla members was around 20 thousand people. But that's the armed groups. Behind that there was this whole military apparatus, for logistics and another large group of people who dealt with non-military affairs. The numbers should be multiplied by five, really.

When the war started I was at another level of responsibility, to the point that they forbid me to come back to the university because I had already been identified.

Another detail, I lived in a neighborhood where all of us knew each other as kids, you know? We all hang out together. Four or five of us were very close and we were about to go to college, so we would have discussions and talk about what we wanted to study. And it came to pass that two of my friends decided to go into the military academy. And one day one of them, the one who's in the infantry, finds out that my name was on a death list and he doesn't tell me but tells my older brother about it.

That's when I decide to leave my house because my house wasn't safe anymore. That is, a neighbor... We have these small convenience stores in our neighborhood, you know, where you can go buy milk or a soda. And once when I went to get something, this woman made a general comment about how in such building lived a subversive. And when you are given that connotation, you can be sure that they're watching you. So what's best, is to leave the house, otherwise you put your whole family in danger.

That's when I left my house and started living in safe houses, one week here and one week there, and having to be on the move all the time. That's when I become what is called clandestine.

I knew many friends in college, people in college and from other places, who would gather there and share experiences. And in two, three occasions... Two or three days later... They, were, well...

A few days later they'd be found on the streets decapitated, you know? That's the kind of stuff I saw and experienced directly.

And they also started identifying men and women from farm cooperatives. They started identifying them and disappearing them. Same thing with the union workers, or in a factory where there was no union. The supervisors would identify people and later send them to their homes to have them assassinated.

There was this region in the outskirts of San Salvador called El Playón. You could find a good number of dead people there. With a head, without a head, without a leg or without an arm. All those atrocities started to be reported by human rights organizations that were created because the situation couldn't be hidden anymore.

## **PART II**

I traveled several times to Nicaragua and Cuba. I was already at another level then. I had been given the responsibility of getting trained. When the Contras are armed in Honduras against Nicaragua, and the Sandinista military realizes that they have to protect both their northern and southern borders, we also realized that we needed to give them support.

But when I came back, I was supposed to arrive to a specific bus station and from that station go to a specific park where I would meet a person who could take me to a safe house.

Back then there were already those people we called "ears". It was the people who were on the lookout for strangers. And if you arrived to a bus terminal where there would be 5 or 6 bus stops, and you didn't get on any bus, you would immediately become suspicious. If you stayed on a spot for more than 10 minutes, the woman who is selling sweets will start wondering what's going on. And you become suspicious and can't no longer stay in one place. So the time limit came up, and I had to be on the move.

There were always 2 or 3 places to reconnect. I went to a neighborhood at the end of a bus line, at another terminal. Generally I would get on it and wait on a pre-destined place. There is a basketball court where I could pretend to be watching the game, but no one arrived. And the other safe houses weren't safe anymore because you couldn't know who would be there or not. It could be already controlled by the army, so I ended up at a third place and by then it was already 7 pm.

Back then by 10 pm you couldn't find anyone on the streets anymore. It was either the militia, the guerrilla, or the military. That's how it was. So the third place comes and nothing... That's when I make the decision to go back to my house. Yes, my house, about 2-3 years after leaving.

This part is a bit emotional. I'm sorry.

It came to pass that my mother had come back from the U.S. to get her residency papers. She left in 1976. I hadn't seen her in years and was terribly surprised to see her open the

door. Then I learned that since she had arrived to El Salvador, she and aunt of mine had gone out looking for me. If there was an unidentified body, they would go out looking for me.

They didn't know anything about me, if I was dead or alive, where I was. There was no communication between us, you see.

That day I stayed home and later at night the next day I came out again, to see if I would run into someone from the union. I went to places that were forbidden for me, where I was not supposed to show my face. But I was completely disconnected. It was not like I could grab a bus and go to Chalatenango without the password; they could've taken me for an infiltrated. I was completely disconnected.

And that's when I decided to leave the country. That moment I thought I could go to Guatemala where I have family. But it wasn't safe. Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua were our bridges but it's not like I could arrive there like a tourist... It wasn't really safe. So Mexico presented itself as an option because I could stay with one of my father's family members, a person I didn't even know existed.

I stayed there for a couple of months but wasn't doing anything. I went through a terrible crisis. I wasn't comfortable with myself, couldn't sleep. I had terrible frustrations and decided to go on my own.

That's when I came here to the United States, at the end of 1982. I was here in the United States. but I couldn't leave the apartment because I was in the United States... This place I had fought against all these years, the place of imperialism... (based on all that radicalism I had been living until then.) I was living with the enemy and that was very hard for me.

I couldn't forgive myself for having come here. All the things I had learned I should've been putting them into practice. I had certain responsibilities and was here in the United States doing nothing.

But I finally got out of the house to please my mother and by chance I ran into a college friend. And we see each other, and wow! It's just a big turn around, you know? We recognized each other by our pseudonym and hey, when did you come here, what happened to you? Tell me everything!

And he tells me that just like me, he was completely disconnected from the group and he was supposed to arrive to such and such place but was afraid to get captured. He comes to the US, to DC and tells me that he's ran into several guys, other people who arrived. Well, it was just such a relief! Such a relief.

We sent a report to El Salvador about the people that were here and their situation, and they decided that we should stay. They ask us to stay but to get organized. We had established back a connection and started receiving reports and everything.

That's when we began to create a solidarity movement in the United States, which proved to be fundamental. We played our role in denouncing the US intervention and force the US government and El Salvador to negotiate, to create a movement of north american citizens who would be willing to get arrested and present complaints. We compared our war with Vietnam. We made the connexion with churches and students, with unions and towns. We would talk to anyone who was willing to listen. And yes, we were able to do a lot.

Much of the work we did in the 80s ended in 1992, with the peace accords. We kept it going for a couple years after that, but after 1992 there was a tendency in the movement to look for other points of interest.

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