

MIGUEL—Transcript

I am Salvadoran, originally from Tenancingo in Cuscatlán. I am a Mayan, descendant of the Perulapa Mayans from Tenancingo.

My grandmothers were 100% native and much of that has been lost. They didn't transmit their knowledge for survival reasons. People stopped speaking the language, using traditional clothing and all of that for political and social reasons. I mean, there's even a law that prohibits certain names. They say “unusual names” but native names are definitely included among the unusual ones. Although you can call yourself Burkar, Smith, or Williams, you can't call yourself Balam or Pixam, which are part of your roots.

Around 1970 there was a teachers' strike because the government had violated previous agreements to increase benefits. Many of these teachers were massacred during the strike.

The school's director was one of the founders of the death squads in my town. It was him who sent me, who sent me and another friend to watch the teachers who were on strike. And then... Well, what I remember is that a guard turned around and pointed a G-3 to our heads and told us that if we went down that road, he would also kill us too. And oddly, I've tried to remember how I got to my house from there, but I've never been able to remember. I don't remember how I got to my house.

Yes, I was in the first grade, more or less. I was 6-years-old. It was sad to see how our teachers fell to the ground. That is, those who in were that area. Because they didn't distinguish between those who were and weren't teachers, civilians, passersby. They just fired at will.

And some will say kids get over it, but I do think it affects you. Although at the time you might go play ball or yo-yo and forget about it.

And then the death squads started to show up... There was the San Pedro Perulapán massacre, between San Martín and Tenancingo, where the police massacred many peasants who I believe were asking for land rights. I'm not sure what their petitions were because I was still young at the time.

But yes, the death squads became active. There were those called ORDEN. There were a great number of abuses at the national level around that time, by both the administration and members of the government.

And I remember, I think it was around 1978. Yes, probably around 77 or 78. I'm not absolutely sure. But the death squads had killed by then more than 200 people in my town. San Martín had only 3,000 people... Maybe seven or eight thousand if you count its rural outskirts.

And it's sad because you say, well now they killed this guy. People you knew who didn't get involved in anything, who meant well. And you ask, but why? And then you start seeing that it was mostly young people getting killed, those between 12 and 30 years old. Then you say, I'm almost that old, now it has to do with me, right?

And that's how most of the youth, children really, most of the children... I must've been 11 or 12... We spent two years sleeping in the coffee fields.

Every night we would hide there and hear the death squad vehicles, how they knocked doors down. We became experts really in identifying the sounds. We even knew which house they were at, at a specific moment. It was really sad.

They usually acted more freely late at night. They worked in groups. They would take off their uniforms at the national guard post and put on civilian clothes. They would take people away. But if they decided to murder someone in the middle of the day, they would do so. That didn't stop them. That's how... We had no other choice than to see in the dark in the coffee fields...

Yeah, the coral snakes were very common in the coffee fields. Corals are poisonous and there is no antidote for them in El Salvador. They are very beautiful, have you ever seen them? Black, red, white, and yellow. But they are very poisonous. And they make a sound like a bird. Have you ever heard a chick peep? Peep, peep. That's exactly how the corals sound. And we, sleeping in the coffee fields, we could hear how the corals moved among the leaves and got closer. Many times... It happened to me a few times in the dark, I saw that shadow slide over my chest. And you'd tell yourself... If the death squads don't kill me, I'm going to get killed by the corals. But at least the corals are defending themselves because we're invading their territory, but the death squads... I don't have to run because I'm gonna die no matter what. Well, then, we have to defend ourselves.

I think that's something we started talking about, but don't think our decision was made in one day. Some would say no way, we can't. But then the brother of one who was most against it, was murdered. And then he said, yes, now we have to do something. I thought it wouldn't happen. But that's how we started an interesting group, because it was... It was a group of about 50 kids.

Among them, those between 10 and 17 year-olds, 16 maybe, were the oldest. And that's how these kids decided to start patrolling the town. Until then we didn't have any influence from an outside group. We're talking about something that happened outside from any external political movement.

And you should've seen those kids, putting a stop to guards when they came for someone with their G-3s, their machine guns. And these kids only had slingshots, nuts and bolts, you know? It was interesting because they were able to put a stop to it.

I think after a while the army understood this and stopped seeing us just as a group of kids. Because those kids started taking away their guns and using them against the death squads, and then we're no longer talking about slingshots. That's when they started seeing us as an insurgent group. That's when the death squads stopped arriving as civilians, the 20 members of the local guard. They had to send a whole company of men, 100 of them plus the airforce. With armoured cars.

But that was already a triumph, because they couldn't come indiscriminately for 10 or 12 people in the night. Instead it came to be that for one person, they had to use a good 100 soldiers, their best trained, with the air force and armoured cars. That's when I think two things happened: one, the risk of people dying in the night was reduced. But also, it was made clear that they weren't civilians. That is, it was the army that was doing it.

If there's one thing that impacted our lives a great deal, I think... There was this family of peasants that I will never be able to forget.

The man was a farmer, a very nice person. His wife made tortillas to sell; the people would buy tortillas from her. They had two children and she was pregnant... That day we didn't have school because... Well, it was the death squads that killed the whole family. To this day, I still don't know why. I was probably 12 or 13 years old, more or less when... They beheaded them all... And her head, her head they had put on... Her mouth they had placed on his organ, and viceversa, they had done the same thing with his head. They had taken out the fetus and just like that, with the umbilical cord still attached, they had placed it on the woman's chest. But... The saddest thing was... They had put the heads of the children... Their heads they had placed on the spikes of the school's front door. And you say, the army and the guard are supposed to protect you, but what do you do when those who are supposed to protect you are killing you?

I guess you can justify the killing of a criminal, a thief some will say. But I still can't understand what justifies the killing of three defenseless children. And to have the sadism of putting them the way they did... That's something that only a mentally unstable person would do.

And that's when you say, well enough is enough. That's it. And that's when I think we made the conscious decision to defend the town. And I say, defend the town but from what I remember it was the townspeople themselves who also protected us. The people who, when we went by would say, "Don't go there, they're waiting for you!" or "Son, come here, and don't go out. I'll tell your mother you're here." And it was clear that people knew us, so...

It was interesting because I got captured when I was 17. Everyone took me for dead for about two years, but then we arrived to liberate the town... People were afraid because they were expecting Russians or Cubans, because the army had told them that among the guerrilla, the combatants of the FMLN, there were Russians, Cubans, and Nicaraguans. And when they saw that it was us kids, those who they fed during Christmas dinners... I remember that, I think I had a stomach ache for a week because of all the food they gave us! (laughter). And the mothers...

It was interesting because the mothers were kissing and hugging me. And the main thing was that they thought I was dead but then they saw me. And first they said, these are neither Cubans nor Russians. But the other thing you would hear was them thanking god for knowing that you were alive and that they were happy to see you. They were just so happy to see you.

What about the peace accords were signed, can you tell me about the celebration afterwards?

Oh, it was the happiest moment, the happiest. There were thousands of people in front of the Cathedral. That same place where people were massacred during Archbishop Romero's funeral. There were tons of people just like for Archbishop Romero. The place was packed, except this time with many ex-combatants. War veterans. And you would look at all these people, would look at the commanders speaking for the first time in public to their people. Afraid that someone would shoot at them, but the peace treaties were supposed to be in place and the United Nations overseeing everything.

And then you would find people and hear them say, "Look, he's alive! Look over there!" People you thought were dead. There was a friend of mine, a girl I knew when I was 13, and she showed up with three kids of her own. "What about you?" I said, "weren't you dead?" "I was very much alive! Just look at me!"

It was one of the happiest moments. You could say, finally, this is finally over.

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