

SUSAN—Transcript

*Which Side are You On? Chalatenango Province, El Salvador, May 1991.*

Driving down to Las Vueltas at the end of the day, we met a long column of *compas* walking slowly into the mountains. *Compa* is short for *compañero*, friend, comrade, partner. *Compa* is what the guerrillas in the FMLN called each other, and one of the two ways we talked about them. The other was *los muchachos*, the boys—*our* boys. We never referred to them as soldiers, a term reserved for members of the FAES, the government's army. Beneath the streaks of dirt, the *compas*' faces communicated little. Their halting progress was painful to watch. Several were carrying two rifles.

I put my foot on the brake while they passed us. Only moments earlier I had been laughing with the health promoters, Blanca and Panchita, and the North American nurse, Lisa. We were giddy after nine hours of vaccinating in Tablón and El Portillo, two little communities in the hills above this town. Now, no one inside the car said a word. I heard the echo of our laughter and the emptiness where the roaring motor and jangling parts of the eight-year-old Toyota Land Cruiser had been. The *compas* did not speak either—not to us, nor each other. Just the slow steady padding of poorly shod feet on dirt and gravel. Watching the men and boys, some as young as nine or ten, it was hard to believe the rumors that the war, now in its twelfth year, would be over by Christmas.

\*\*\*

I'm Susan Freireich, I live in Cambridge, Mass, and I'm sixty-eight.

*Susan, I understand that you lived in El Salvador for a while, actually, during the war. When was the first time that you were in El Salvador?*

I went in 1986. It was in a delegation that was organized by New El Salvador Today from the SHARE humanitarian foundation, NEST. And NEST had been helping these displaced people who had been in refuge at Calle Real refugee camp outside San Salvador, Find cities in the United States that wanted to affiliate with them as sister cities two to sort of keep them safe when they went back to their, what the call lands of origin, when they went back home.

A friend of mine and I started the Cambridge Sister City Project. So in December 1986 before we had achieved sister cityhood, NEST decided to have a delegation go down there. That was my first time in El Salvador. That was a pretty amazing time because, the

second night there was a mortar attack on the village. I thought we were going to die that night.

\*\*\*

As soon as we entered the village, I knew something was wrong. No old men were sitting on the wooden benches in front of the small whitewashed church. No women hurried across the dirt path through the plaza balancing basins of cornmeal on their heads and pulling a child in each hand. In fact, there were no children in sight at all, except for the *compas* who were disappearing at a bend in the road behind us.

I must have been mesmerized by the empty plaza because I didn't see the slender, almost frail-looking man, until I nearly bumped into him a few paces before the door to the clinic. He was wearing the black, long-sleeved shirt and black pants I recognized as the uniform of an FMLN *comandante*. "*Con permiso.*" He excused himself in a voice so soft I had to lean closer to hear. "Would you be willing to take a wounded *compa* up the mountain to join his squadron?"

He told me the soldiers had attacked his company about a kilometer below the village. "We returned their gunfire and there was a battle," he said. "The soldiers were supported by mortars launched from Chalate, and a few of the mortars landed in Las Vueltas." *So that explains the lack of activity on the street*, I thought.

"Several of my boys were wounded," he said. *And that explains why some of the kids moving up the mountain were carrying more than one rifle.* "I want to get all the *compas* into the hills, up to Zapotal, so the army doesn't attack the village."

\*\*\*

When I was a junior in college, I was in Guatemala and I did a semester in Guatemala. It was a very interesting time because in 1954, the United States had engineered a coup to get rid of the Arbenz government. Between 54 and 61, the left was organizing and being repressed at the same time, and there was at that time... There was just a campaign to get rid of indigenous people. .

I remember someone asked me out and I went to some dance with him, and I remember talking and how he thought that indigenous people were keeping the country back and what's wrong with them is that they were self-sufficient. I mean, it was such an eye opener. I was like, wow!

\*\*\*

Before I answered the *comandante*, I needed to think about the implications, about possible repercussions to other church workers who often used my car. I was not

supposed to carry combatants. Period. I had been given this single directive, along with the vehicle, when I began working with the Diocesan Health Commission of Chalatenango Province three months earlier. It didn't matter whether they were *guerrillas* with the FMLN or soldiers in the Armed Forces of El Salvador, the FAES. The church was supposed to be neutral, and although my car was owned by Aesculapius International Medicine, the non-governmental organization sponsoring my work, it was registered to the Archdiocese in San Salvador.

Neutrality can be a sound ideological principle. Maybe it made sense here in El Salvador. After all, Catholic priests, nuns, lay workers, and parishioners had been targeted by the army. But I wasn't convinced of its practical merits in a civil war. I thought about civilians who had tried to stay out of the conflict only to be accused of helping "the enemy" and murdered by the other side. It had happened to the family of my friend, Magdalena. Her politically neutral cousin was shot and killed outside his village one night by the FMLN, and his body was left to rot where it fell. It was more than a week before his mother and brothers were able to collect the boy and give him a proper burial.

\*\*\*

*So you went the first time in 1986, and that was the time that you were there for two weeks, and then when did you go back after that?*

I went back a few months later. Early in April, eleven people from the village were captured by the army. The army had come in searched all the houses and "found" shirts... I guess if you had a black shirt, they decided you were part of the FMLN. I mean none of these people were guerrillas.

Anyway, NEST decided to send down an emergency delegation and I was on it. I felt obligated to go I guess because actually I knew everybody that they had arrested. I had met everybody because the village was so small. There might've been six hundred people in the village and like four hundred of them were children. I probably met all of the adults. Because the goal of that first of December 1986 delegation was to bring back people's stories, to be able to tell them here.

I remember a good distance outside the village we were stopped by soldiers, and that's the first time I was captured by the army. And they took us away in a helicopter, to meet with the colonel whose name is Caceres. And this colonel was the person whose name figured in all of the testimony that we had collected in December from people. Every bad thing that happened to them, the author of those bad things was Colonel Caceres and you know his name came up again and again again. And there we were waiting in his office for him to come back from the soccer match or something, because it was Saturday or Sunday.

So we were his captives. I really wish I could reconstruct the 7 hours we were under his "care" because it was amazing. The first two hours we were definitely his captives. The

second two hours we were his captive audience and he basically espoused his philosophy of everything. And he was so racist and so awful, it was I mean... He had been trained at the School of the Americas, and he had theories about blacks. Just racist stuff. Like black Americans were this and that. It was horrifying really. And the way he talked about the campesinos, it was just the same thing. His racism, his elitism just transferred.

Well, our issue was that if they are civilians, they're not supposed to be targets of the army. Simple. And he says, they're not civilians, they're putting a wool over your eyes. That was the line. Because we actually met with the high command once we got to San Salvador. They said that. They all said that.

Finally we got to talk about the people who had been arrested or captured from the village. The next morning we went to the jail and had some more meetings with people, try to figure out what to do. We met with a judge, and they let all of the people they were still holding out. And we interviewed all of them, each of them as they came out.

*And what did they tell you?*

Oh, they were tortured...

\*\*\*

It was getting late and I wanted to be in Chalate before dark. I worried that the little diesel left in the tank might not get me there if I took a detour. And what about the consequences of ignoring the church's injunction? There were a million reasons why I should not do what the *comandante* asked. Although they had flashed through my mind in seconds, I felt apologetic, ashamed that I had hesitated too long.

"*Bueno. Sí,*" I said. "I'll take the *compa* to Zapotal." My voice came out small and I felt like a little girl.

"I'll tell them to get him ready," he said.

The *comandante* and another *compa* climbed into the back with Panchita and Blanca, who had decided to keep me company. My only concession to the church was to ask my new passengers to put their weapons on the floor. The *compa's* posture struck me as too straight and rigid. He must have been in a lot of pain, and perhaps he was fighting the urge to cry out. I smelled his blood.

The *comandante* made an announcement for my benefit. "I'm an old friend of Eduardo Alas," he said. That was the Bishop's real name, even though he was always spoken of and addressed by his title, *Monseñor*. I caught the *comandante's* eye in my rear view mirror.

“*Sí*,” he said to my reflection, “we have spent a lot of time together. I know him well. Tell him that Juan Ramos sends his regards.”

I aimed a forced smile at the mirror and said, “*¡Cómo no!* Sure, I’ll tell him.” Although I knew for certain that I was not going to say a thing to the Bishop, because if I did I would have to explain the circumstances to *Monseñor*—like how (in God’s name!) I had run into Juan Ramos!

As soon as I saw the *compas* ahead of us, I eased off the gas pedal. The *comandante* was quick to notice. “Don’t stop here,” he instructed, “Drive past the next hill, and let us off on the other side. I don’t want the soldiers to see us getting out of your car,” he added, in a respectful tone of voice.

The *comandante’s* words took my breath away. I became so distracted that I hardly noticed the *compas* getting out of the car when I stopped on the far side of the hill.

The last reserves of energy drained from my body while I reviewed it in my head: No, I had not seen the government soldiers. Even after the *comandante’s* revelation that they were near enough to see *us*, I still couldn’t see *them*. I didn’t know they were camped on a hill across the valley, facing the road.

\*\*\*

When I did get my masters in public health at Boston University, I had decided I wanted to equip myself and do something more substantial than just bear witness. I went to do public health and worked with the diocese of Chalatenango. Was part of the technical team, the *equipo tecnico*, of CODIPSO which was the Health Commission of the diocese of Chalatenango. A group of Salvadorans and internationals who trained health promoters in a large number of villages, probably 100 villages, small villages. We trained, supervised, helped, got materials for these wonderful folks who volunteered to be trained and receive no pay.

A lot of times, I would be going between the lines. I would be stopped in one village by the guerrillas, and asked if I’d seen these soldiers, and continue on stopped by the soldiers and asked if I’d seen the guerrillas. The army I didn’t tell anything to and the guerrilla I did tell things to, because... But I was supposed to be neutral. I’m really supposed to be neutral. I’m driving a car that is registered by the archdiocese, and the church was supposed to be neutral, so I was not supposed to do a lot of things.

\*\*\*

Every international worker I knew in El Salvador was engaged in legitimate activities—popular education and teacher training, journalism, economic development projects, healthcare, legal aid. Unfortunately, if you were doing this work among the most needy

you were under suspicion. Poor people in the countryside or in marginalized communities were, according to the government's definition, subversives. If the authorities targeted you, it was all over. You were *quemado*, burned, and news of your status spread like wildfire. Someone who got burned became a pariah. It was too dangerous to associate with a burned person because of the intense heat. Getting burned was therefore to be avoided at all costs because you could not continue your work or seek the comfort and support of friends without endangering them. You might as well go home. And since you never knew who might be an informer, you had to watch your back, a posture that I was finding quite difficult to maintain.

Now the *comandante's* last sentence about the soldiers seeing us repeated in my head. I was so absorbed in considering the consequences of my actions, or to be more precise, the consequences of my actions having been observed by the soldiers, that I almost missed Panchita's revelation about the *comandante*.

"Juan Ramos used to be a soldier in the Cavalry," she said. "You know, with the government." She said that Juan Ramos, the *comandante*, had been captured by the FMLN during their 1989 offensive.

"That was while we had this deal with the Red Cross that both sides would periodically turn prisoners over to them. But by the time the Red Cross came to take him back, he had decided not to leave. Instead he made a really dramatic speech about how he wouldn't fight against his brothers anymore."

"And he joined the FMLN," Blanca added, stealing Panchita's thunder by preempting her predictable last line.

\*\*\*

*Were they protecting you when you were working as a health worker and you just didn't know about it?*

Well, I don't think so. In that particular incident, a couple of years later I was up in Ocatul and a woman showed up at the health promoters house. And she said oh, how are you? I haven't seen you in such a long time! And I recognized her but I couldn't tell... She was the young woman in the car turns out. And we were sort of reminiscing about it and everything. And I said, I think the only reason why got out of that alive is because the *compas* recognized the car. And she said, "Oh, no. Oh, no. They recognized the car, but they thought we were giving stuff to the army." So, my perceptions at the time were probably way off many many times.

*But it's interesting because it just goes to show how like in a war, in any war, anyone can become the enemy of both sides...*

Oh, yes. Yes, well, it's hard to be neutral because when you're not with them they say you're against them. A lot of people, a lot of civilians got caught in that.

\*\*\*

What happened around Las Vueltas that day weighed me down. I had violated the neutrality principle of the church and was now driving a marked car. I had no way to prepare for how this fact was going to play itself out, and it would be necessary to admit everything to the next person who asked to borrow it. It was as if the flames were already licking at my feet.

I had come to El Salvador because I wanted to do something useful that would benefit the civilians living in this war zone. I knew it would be dangerous, but I still believed in the “safety net” of working for the officially neutral Catholic Church—in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

Like Magdalena’s innocent cousin, my own beliefs and allegiances did not matter. Whether I wanted to or not, I had crossed the line. I had become a part of the struggle. Now I was subject to the same risks and dangers as everyone else.

\*\*\*

*After the peace accords were signed, and a lot of combatientes came out and started telling you that they were combatientes. What did you think of them, what did you think of the guerrilla?*

Oh, idealistic, beautiful people. I'm sure there were some jerks, but I didn't meet them.

*What was beautiful about them?*

The Salvadoran people in general. Here's a prejudiced thing to say about a whole group of people. But all the people that I knew, they had so much faith despite their persecution, despite their losses, despite all their suffering. They always had faith. Ok, I'm not a religious person but if I were... I was born into the Jewish faith. I don't practice any religion, but I'm a spiritual person. It's just amazing that they just believed that things were going to be better. They struggled constantly for things to be better. They never gave up. Such strong people with nothing.

I had a very good friend in Las Flores whom I met the first time I was there. She has since then died, and I'm close to her grandson. When I first met her, she had ten children and seven of them were killed by the army. And she was bringing up three of her grandchildren who were orphans. But I mean, even she was not a despairing person. She was realistic but hopeful.

And I think the resistance itself was hopeful. I mean, it's not hopeful when you just give in and get run over, and let people... If you don't fight back, that's was giving up completely.

When people ask me about the case of El Salvador and when it started, I say officially started in 1979, but that's only because people started to resist. It wasn't a war before that, it was genocide. So fighting back I think was an expression of hope.

So these folks who were against all odds, with the United States funding a million and a half dollars a day, for so many years, and yet they didn't give up. They didn't see it like an impenetrable wall for them, they actually could see a way through. I mean, that's faith, I guess, more than anything else. It impressed me, it impressed me so much that... I mean, that's why I kept going back, I'm sure because I wanted some of that. I wanted to feel that way, I suppose.

*Original audio can be found at [www.memoryandpeace.net](http://www.memoryandpeace.net). All rights reserved for El Salvador Oral Histories Project. 2008.*