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Voices of Nicaragua

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Dear Peter,

I have just spent two weeks in Nicaragua working with PBS on a television documentary. My assignment was to find people willing to talk on camera about life in Nicaragua. What follows are interviews with a handful of the people I met. There were many others, but these few do provide a fairly representative cross section.

Eduardo was unwilling to tell me his last name or to be interviewed on camera. He was about six feet tall, of light skin, and sixty years old. His finely embroidered white guayabera shirt and well-pressed grey slacks gave him the appearance of a man of means. Before the revolution, he had been. He had owned a household appliance store that imported most of its merchandise. But, because the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional) government considered Eduardo's merchandise as inessential luxury items, they hadn't allowed him the dollars he needed to keep his shelves stocked. So he went out of business. Nonetheless, Eduardo had decided to stay in Nicaragua.

"Everyone else has left. Most of my friends, my brothers and sisters, even my wife and children. Most have gone to the United States, some to Costa Rica, but I didn't want to go. At least not yet. I wanted to stay for the experience. From the very start, I didn't think that I would agree with this government. And I don't. But it's interesting to watch. You see, I lived through the 1972 earthquake that devastated Managua and left thousands dead and hundreds of thousands homeless. It was a horrible thing to see, but it was also fascinating. Watching what the FSLN is doing to this country often reminds me of the earthquake."

Eduardo had studied business at a small private college in Louisiana. As we talked on the sidewalk of a once elegant, now decaying shopping mall, he whispered his answers in English, and kept peering over his shoulder to make sure no one else was listening.

"What these people - the government - has done to this country is an absolute shame. Our freedoms have been replaced by repression and fear. You know, there are certain animals that die when they are forced to live in captivity. Here we human beings feel caged in."

"As far as the Sandinistas are concerned, as a Nicaraguan you have only two choices: either you're with the revolution or your against it. Either you're a FSLN revolutionary or your a counter-revolutionary. And anyone who says a word against the government is automatically a counter-revolutionary."

"But the fact is, it's the Cubans who run this government. The FSLN gives them food, gas, everything while," he added with a snort,

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"the Cubans have been the real beneficiaries of this revolution, and the people here resent it enormously."

Eduardo lit up a cigarette, and invited me to take a ride in his white Datsun pick-up truck. He said he wanted to show me something. As we rode along in the truck's small cabin, he kept the air conditioner going at full blast. My skin broke out in goose bumps.

"Now don't get me wrong. I don't think socialism has to be a bad thing. I think it could be quite good if carried out with moderation and the participation of all. You know, a democratic socialism. But that's not what we have here. The main problem here is that everything is done by imposition. I don't know why the FSLN has to do it this way. I don't know what it is that they fear so terribly. That's the question everyone here asks."

"For example, one night each week, like most everyone else in Managua, I must patrol the city streets from 9 P.M. until 6 A.M. They say we are supposed to watch out for contras (counter-revolutionaries) but everybody knows that there aren't any contras around here. And even if there were, what would we do since we aren't allowed to carry arms on patrol. No, they are not interested in our watching out for the contras, but in their watching us. It's a way of keeping the people under control, and of punishing those who have a 'negative attitude'. For example, if you decline to do your patrol duty, then your neighborhood Sandinist Defense Committee will not give you your weekly coupons. Without these coupons, you can't get your family's ration of meat, rice, cooking oil, and milk. People will tell you that the majority of Nicaraguans support the FSLN. It's not true; I'd say that at least half of those who 'support' them do so out of sheer necessity. They need to show support so that they can eat, so that they can get by."

"I tell you, if these guys stay in power here and the guerillas win in El Salvador, then Honduras and Guatemala and finally Mexico will fall, and you'll have communists lurking on your doorstep."

"So you'd like to see the contras take power?" I asked.

"I really don't care who comes to power as long as it's not the FSLN. Anybody is better than these guys."

We had arrived at the huge billboard he so desperately wanted me to see. In bold print, it read, "Counter-revolutionaries beware: a thousand eyes are watching you, a thousand ears are listening."

Rigo Pena had the appearance of an old gold prospector. When I came upon him on a dirt path two hours south of Managua, he was mounted on an aging mare, and immediately raised his dusty cowboy hat in greeting. His deeply lined face was covered with two days' stubble, and his amiable grin revealed an almost toothless mouth.

"Good day companera," he shouted, as he brought his trotting horse to my side. "What brings a foreigner like you to these parts?"

I explained that I was asking people how their lives had changed since the revolution.

"Personally I'd say it's the difference between misery and dignity. Before the revolution, life was miserable for me. Like so many other landless farmers in this region, I worked on the estate of a member of the bourgeoisie. We earned pitiful wages back then - an average of 15 cordobas a day. That was hardly enough to keep our families fed on a diet of tortillas and beans. There weren't many schools back then, and in any case, who could afford to send their children to school? There were so many other necessities to be paid for, and there were weeks when

we didn't work at all.

"But that was before. Since the revolution, things have been glorious, thank God. The Sandinist revolution triumphed in July 1979. Before the victory, this land belonged to the Nicaraguan ambassador to Costa Rica, a Somocista. The Sandinistas confiscated this land, and by August 1979, twenty of us - all landless peasants from this region - formed a cooperative here to work the land collectively.

"Before we had to buy most of our food. Now we grow it for ourselves. It's taken a lot of hard work, but God knows it's been worth it. Our families are better fed and clothed than before the revolution. Before, there were only two schools in the region; now there are five. Before, the schools only gave classes in the morning; now they also give classes in the afternoon and evening. There are even special classes in the evening for the adults who are learning how to read and write. What's more, all the classes are absolutely free.

"Before, the banks only gave agricultural credits to the rich farmers; since the revolution, we can also get credit. I do business with a bank that wouldn't have let me through its doors before the revolution.

"Some Nicaraguans will try to tell you that this revolution has been a bad thing. Don't believe them. This revolution was fought by the people for the people. Only the rich lost out, you know, the bourgeoisie. But we, the people, have benefited.

While Rigo lifted his hat to wipe the beads of sweat from his brow, I asked him what he thought about the war against the "contras", and of the possibility of direct U.S. intervention.

"I say let the Marines come. God knows, it sure won't be the first time. I say let them come to see how we'll welcome them. They'll be better trained and armed than we will but we will have right on our side. We won't win, that's for sure. But we won't give up until the last Nicaraguan is killed either."

After giving me a brief tour of his cooperative's carefully weeded tomato patches and corn fields, Rigo rode away. The morning's sun was particularly bright, making his silhouette against the horizon all the more dramatic. About one-hundred yards from where Rigo left me, stood a clapboard shack with an adobe porch, where two young girls in dirty, tattered dresses hurriedly prepared small pastries under the impatient eye of their grandmother.

"Hurry up you two. We can't waste more wood on this oven just because you two dally. Now get on with it!"

As I approached the senora, I apologized for whatever inconvenience my asking a few questions might cause. I'm not sure why - perhaps honored by the visit of a foreigner - her scowl melted into a soft smile, and automatically she offered me a handful of steaming hot turnovers. Her name was Maria. She was a widow, and had been for a long time. And she had been baking cakes as long as she had been a widow. Both her black shift and the black kerchief she wore on her head were faded. When I asked how life had changed for her since the revolution, her scowl returned.

"Who would ever have imagined that life could be so bad? Who would have ever thought that these boys could so rapidly ruin our country? I have many mouths to feed. It was difficult enough before. Now it is almost impossible. I have no land, so I make a living doing what you see me do. Since the Sandinistas came to power all that we have known is shortages. Shortages of everything - milk, cooking oil, but for me the worst is the shortage of flour. At times, even if you're willing

to pay the highest price for it, there's just none to be had. Then, there's the problem of taxes. This government taxes everything. Can you imagine, they even tax my oven! Now that's something the Somocistas never did. All these additional costs, and yet I can't charge much more for my bread because otherwise no one will buy it."

"Why didn't you join that cooperative?" I asked, pointing at the nearby tomato patches.

"I couldn't. I have no husband to work the land. No, things are very bad, but the worst of it is that we have no freedom to talk. If you talk against the Sandinistas, they will jail you, or perhaps do something even worse. And according to the priest who comes here on Sundays, the clergy suffers even worse persecution. He says that - "

At that moment, two young men approached the house. Without any explanation, the old woman returned to her task of placing the unbaked pastries in her adobe oven, and putting the golden brown ones in a large wicker basket. The two men stood at a distance, saying nothing, looking our way with their arms crossed and their legs spread apart. After a few minutes, they left. Once they were on their way and out of hearing-range, Maria whispered with a slight sneer, "So did you see?"

"See what?" I asked.

"The tall one, he was a miliciano." The miliciano are the Sandinistas minimally-trained, poorly-paid paramilitary force.

"How could you tell?" I queried.

"It's quite obvious. He was wearing army boots and fatigue pants. Just have one of those milicianos report that you're talking against the system and your suffering will start. That's why people are afraid to tell you the truth about what's happening here. If they tell you things are better, they are lying, and that's the plain of it."

The morning that I drove to Masaya was extremely hot, humid, and cloudless. My car's air conditioner gave up even trying to keep the air cool soon after I set out from the capital. The road from Managua to the nearby city of Masaya is one of the country's better roads, and surely one of its most traveled. Being a Sunday, it was particularly crammed with traffic. Bus and truck loads of people waving yellow-and-white papal flags were heading for the capital. Managua's archbishop, Monsenor Obando y Bravo was celebrating a mass in honor of his twenty-fifth anniversary as a priest. While the archbishop was an ally of the FSLN during their struggle to overthrow Anastasio Somoza, he now is one of the most vocal and respected critics of the new regime. Many of the thousands who attend the masses that he officiates do so as a form of protest against the FSLN. Since the visit of Pope John Paul II, a papal flag is also a symbol of opposition.

Like thousands of others, I was not headed for his mass, but in the opposite direction to a public act being staged in Masaya at the very same time. The minister of agriculture - who is well known for his film-star good looks and crowd appeal - Jaime Wheelock, was handing out titles for over 30,000 acres of land to peasants. Most of it had been expropriated from "the bourgeoisie".

I was about half way to Masaya when I picked up my first set of hitchhikers. Two women jumped in the back, and a man took the front seat. They were headed to Masaya to attend the "manifestacion". The man had a square, dark-skinned face, wore a slightly soiled guayabera shirt and dark trousers, and looked about thirty. At the time of the revolution,

he had been studying medicine in Mexico. When he finished his studies a couple of years ago, he returned to Nicaragua to work in one of the government's health clinics. I asked him if he thought the majority of Nicaraguan people were better off now than before the revolution.

"Undoubtedly!" he answered emphatically. "There are far more schools, now there is health care for all the people - before it was only for the rich - and almost all the people have been taught to read and write. Before the revolution, an average of 125 people caught polio each year; last year, there was not a single case."

"I find when I ask some other people this same question, they are afraid to talk. Why is that?"

"It's part of our culture. Our people, that is, the poor majority of workers and peasants, have never been asked their opinion. Here, before, Somoza and the bourgeoisie made all the decisions. They didn't care to know what the masses thought or wanted. So the people never learned to express themselves."

"But," I went on, "many of those who do talk are critical of the government."

"That's because they are not conscientizado - they need consciousness-raising. With political education, they will change."

I thought of suggesting to the doctor that he put Orwell's 1984 on his summer reading list. I asked him about the Catholic Church's role in Nicaragua.

"Many of Nicaragua's priests fought alongside the guerrillas and remain true revolutionaries. Some people will try to tell you that that it is a contradiction to be both religious and revolutionary. But it's not true, because both Catholicism and the Sandinistas are fighting for justice, right?"

"And those in the traditional wing of the Church?" I asked, referring to that large percentage of Catholics who follow Archbishop Obando y Bravo.

"Well, there will always be religious fanatics."

I left the doctor and his friends near Masaya's main plaza. Since the rally wouldn't start for another hour, I decided to visit the handicraft market on the edge of town. On the way, I picked up another hitchhiker. Jasmine Guillen wore a simple, metallic blue shift and delicate, dangling gold earrings. She had high cheekbones, a sharp chin, and she was carrying her two sons - three and five years of age. I asked her if she planned to go to the rally.

"No, I really don't have time for such things. And anyway, they happen almost every week."

Did she think life had improved for most Nicaraguans since the revolution?

She did not look up to answer my question, but continued to tuck the younger son's light green shirt into his yellow shorts.

"Well," she said, "theoretically we are better off. Before, for example, good health care was reserved for the rich, because only they could afford to pay for it. Now it is for everybody, it is for the Nicaraguan people. The only problem is that now we don't have any medicines in our clinics. Theoretically, food is now cheaper. But there is usually a shortage of most basic foods, so in fact to get things you must pay more. Of course, many foods are rationed to ensure that every family gets some of the basic foods. But the rations are small, and the lines to get them very long. People here are becoming very tired of waiting in long lines."

As she spoke, there was not the slightest note of rancor in her voice. She seemed a bit sad, but mostly resigned.

"The fact is, we all supported the revolution against Somoza. What we didn't support was the Sandinistas' attacking of a superpower. Waging a war against the United States is insane when you're a tiny, poor country like Nicaragua. Doing it means that money that is desperately needed for buying food and medicine is being wasted on arms."

I asked Jasmine if both she and her husband worked.

"I am a single mother and a nurse. I would like to work, but in fact, I can't afford to. The government offered me a job in a village far from my home. The salary they offered me was so meager that it barely covered the cost of both my transport costs and buying food for my family. Also, I found that to hire a competent person to take care of my children while I worked would cost me more than my own salary. And even if they had been able to pay me more, it would not have made sense to do it because I would have had to work weekends and attend union and FSLN meetings in the evenings. I don't know when they thought I was supposed to see my children and clean my house."

All my best,

Received in Hanover 10/6/83