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From Bulls-eye to Backdrop: Santiago Atitlán Eleven years After Guatemala's Civil War

By Ezra Fieser

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Even before he glanced at me with his pensive eyes, I knew what was coming. I'd spent the better part of two days walking through the hills that cup this lakeside Mayan pueblo with Domingo Damian, a former guerrilla who fought the military for 11 of Guatemala's 36 years of civil war. We'd passed the abandoned hospital, the women, men and children carrying loads of firewood down impossibly steep hills and the makeshift homes they live in. By the time I asked him what had changed since the end of the war, I expected his answer. It came out like a cliché waiting to be spoken. "Nothing has changed."

The Guatemala I am coming to know, 11 years after the end of the war, is one consumed by the effects of its past. The war's hangover — in particular, the violence that has persisted — comes up in most conversations and it dominated the recent elections. But that obsession led me to wonder how what the war accomplished. "You should go to Santiago," Elder Gutierrez, a retired government worker with whom I lived and watched the presidential elections, told me. "They kicked out the military. That's a town that is very strong."

I came to Santiago to find a place that embodied the change for which the guerrillas fought. The former guerrillas I met joined the battle for what seemed like noble causes: ownership of the land they worked, better education, health facilities, more opportunities. What I found, however, was a place stagnant in tradition and struggling to progress. In Santiago, as Domingo so simply stated, really nothing has changed.

To get here, we traveled a slow-going, two-lane highway that clings to the Pacific slope between volcanic peaks to the east and long, flat fields of sugar cane to the west. We wound past volcanic peaks to the shores of Lago Atitlán and finally to Santiago, a cramped cluster of unremarkable churches, stores and concrete homes hugged by a small valley.

It is a large pueblo

About the Author

Ezra K. Fieser began working in newspapers at the age of 16 for an afternoon daily in Hudson, N.Y. He has been a reporter or editor at newspapers in Springfield, Mass., Phoenix, Baltimore and, until last September, he was deputy city editor at The (Wilmington, Del.) News Journal.

He grew up in New York's Hudson Valley and attended Emerson College in Boston.

Ezra and his wife, Robyn, arrived in Guatemala in October as the country prepared to elect a new president. He is interested in Central America's transforming economy and particularly how the changes affect agriculture in Guatemala.





On market day, local women gather around the butcher shop in Santiago's central market.

of about 40,000, the vast majority of who are Tz'Utujil, Mayan descendants. Daily life is defined by tradition. Men and boys work the coffee farms, fish the lake or climb the hills for leña — firewood — that they carry back in pick-up truck or in bundles strapped to their foreheads; women and children rise before dawn to make tortillas, smacking cornmeal back and forth between their palms until it's ready for the hot, leña-fired griddle. Red and blue converted U.S. school buses roar through the tiny streets, leaving diesel-black exhaust in their wake. And the central market springs to life each morning with bags of yellow corn, baskets of bright red tomatoes and the stomach-turning odor of raw meat hanging from the butcher shop. It seems an unlikely place for war.

I walked to the town's center to meet Domingo, a Tz'Utujil and former official in the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit. His 11 years amongst the guerrillas were spent hiding in makeshift camps high in the hills and fighting the military in occasional, but deadly, confrontations.

Domingo sat on a bench in front of Banrural's ATM machine, wearing a white t-shirt, blue Nautica ball cap and

absurdly oversized Levi's that were cinched with a black belt, the end of which hung 6 inches off the side of his stubbed 5'4" frame. I introduced myself and sat next to him, but he kept a newspaper over his face when





Domingo Damian, an official with the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit from 1980 until 1991.

he talked. For a moment, I thought he was kidding, going incognito for my benefit, a show for the foreigner. He was quick with a smile, revealing a grill of broken and missing teeth.

During the next two days, his disarming outward appearance eased. Domingo's recollection of the war — most of which was corroborated by facts collected by the United Nations and Catholic church — is a mix of loss, personal sacrifice and grizzly battles.

At the age of 26, Domingo joined the guerrillas, he said, because he grew up in a place void of opportunity. He left school after 6th grade and most of his peers already dropped out. There was no hospital to go to when he was sick. And the government was not doing anything to make things better.

By the time Domingo joined the guerrilla movement, the war was in full

force. It began in 1960, officially, but its start lies in 1954. The administration of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman was trying to nationalize the land holdings of the United Fruit Company, then Guatemala's largest land holder, today Chiquita Brands. But a U.S.-backed coup toppled Arbenz government and installed a military government against which groups of peasants banded together. The guerrilla movement grew, partially with help from Cuba and Nicaragua. The military and its paramilitary squads responded by kidnapping and killing those allegedly associated with the guerrillas. The war grew fat on itself and by the year Domingo joined, the guerrillas were recruiting soldiers from the small villages where problems of hunger and poverty were exacerbated by the war.

I'd asked Domingo to describe his years in the war, to show me battle sights. He led me down the road to a small park. It was a likely starting point, I thought, knowing that it was a memorial marking the site of the December 1990 massacre in which a handful of drunk soldiers opened fire on a crowd, killing 14 townspeople. The incident is considered a turning point in the war. It was followed by an unprecedented move; the town, with the backing of Congress, declared independence from the military, forcing it to close its base.¹

Instead of lingering in the park, where a few tourists checked out the grave markers, we crossed the street and walked through a coffee finca on a path strewn with Styrofoam cups, plastic bags and the occasional piece of discarded clothing. About 200 yards from the road, we approached a small, abandoned, concrete building. It's all



Road-side grave sites in the small park dedicated to the 1990 massacre of 14 Santiago civilians.

¹ La Comisión para el Escalaracimiento Histórico (CEH), Guatemala: Memoria Del Silencio, Appendix I, Volume 2, Case 6

that remains of the base the military abandoned in 1990. It also houses a vivid memory for Domingo. On a scouting mission, he said, he saw a man tortured by electrocution there. He has little doubt that a mass grave is buried just behind the building. The national forensic foundation has never attempted an excavation of the site, according to its records.

We spent the next two hours hiking uphill, past the closed hospital, pick-up trucks full of firewood and machete-wielding workers, and finally to a dirt path.

“Bah,” Domingo said to a woman and two boys who approached. It sounded like and interrupted “bye,” but it’s a greeting in Tz’Utujil. The woman and children passed, faces strained with exhaustion, backs piled high with firewood. “That is her life now,” Domingo said. “Her husband was killed in the war. This is what she has to do every day.”

He walked slowly for the next few minutes, whipping weeds in front of him with a stick and talking about life in Santiago now. His two grown sons could not find jobs locally, so they run a fruit and vegetable stand a few hours away near the Pacific Coast. His daughter died of cancer.

And when his 4-year-old son recently fell ill, there were no doctors to see him. “Really, nothing has changed,” he said. If anything, he said, the violence is worse.

But unlike during the war, the violence now is a complex mix of crime carried out by gangs of marginalized youth — called *maras* — and assassinations conducted as part of the drug trade. Last year was the deadliest in the country’s post-war history, with 6,033 murders — a rate nearly eight times higher than that in the U.S.

In Santiago, it has taken a bizarre face. Called ‘*limpiezas sociales*,’ groups of vigilantes are confronting the violence with violence. Last year, they killed 35 people in Santiago and the nearby towns of Cerro de Oro and San Lucas Tolimán. The victims are suspected drug traffickers, rapists and, in two cases, witches. The name translates to social cleansers.

Some members of the groups have been identified as local farmers and peasants. According to the Santiago branch of the national office of human rights, the group believes it is stepping in where the government has failed. There are only 20 police officers patrolling an area that is home to more than 40,000. The group



Pick-up trucks full of workers or goods, in this case firewood, are a common site in Santiago. They act as collective taxis, traveling the dirt roads that wind up and down the mountains.



This woman's husband was killed during the civil war. She climbs the mountains every day now to collect firewood, which she sells in town.

is eerily reminiscent of the guerrilla forces, dressed in green and carrying AK-47 machine guns.

Domingo was dressed the same way when in 1980, when he and a small group of guerrilla soldiers launched an attack that ignited the conflict in Santiago.

* * *

Today, it doesn't look like more than a crumbling brick box with a steel gate that swings wildly in the mid-morning winds. But it marks the spot where a military official was killed. The guerrillas hid in the thicket just off the road and launched a makeshift bazooka grenade. The military general crawled to the side of the road and died. The military erected this brick box. And the civil war, already 20-years-old in other parts of the country, started in earnest in this small town.

For the next 11 years, a quiet war was carried out between the guerrillas, who fought from their remote camps in steep mountains, and the military, which had set up a base at the edge of town. The war effectively ended in 1991 in Santiago, when the military was forced

out. Five years later, in December 1996, peace accords were signed and the war officially ended.

In the decade since, Santiago has faded from the government's eye. With the financial support of a charity, the hospital was reopened in April of 2005. Six months later it was destroyed by mudslides caused by Hurricane Stan. It is still closed.

The peace accords included provisions for locals to



Domingo Damian, former guerrilla



(above) Juanita, a Tz'Utujil woman who sells woven blankets on the streets of Santiago, said there are too many vendors now, and not enough buyers. (left) A Tz'Utujil woman in Santiago's small market. (below) A woman carries a basket of tortillas to a local food stall.



have a chance to own the lands they worked. But there has been little effort to ensure those provisions were followed, meaning most farmers work land owned by others.

And while a few hotels have opened around the lake since the end of the war, there are not nearly enough tourists to support dozens of vendors who hawk woven blankets and rugs.

Most continue to live like they did during the war, a collecting firewood, working what few communal farmlands that remain, or carrying freshly made tortillas in simple baskets on their heads to local food stalls.

For Domingo, life has a familiar feel. During the war, he spent 11 years without once seeing his family. These days, by the time he arrives home from working overnight as a guard for a small hotel owned by an American, his wife and child have already left to prepare food.

Two weeks after I met him, I returned to Santiago. Domingo, guarded but friendly, said, "Everything is good. Or, at least it's the same." □

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