

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-27 Conflict in San Pedro: Three Who Fled

Apartado 27
Ocotlán, Oaxaca
México
28 September, 1975

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The oldest brother of Constantino Martinez was returning home with his mules from a trip selling drygoods in the coastal lowlands across the mountains. Nearing San Pedro, he saw five men from neighboring San Juan sitting by the side of the trail. They called out to him the formal question of greeting-- "Where did you go?"-- and he answered that he had gone on a journey. They invited him to have a drink of mescal with them. Constantino Martinez tells me:

"Now my brother does not like their way of speaking to him, but as he is alone and as there are five of them, he tells them yes, why not. If he says no, right away they get angry. So he says yes, why not. And they begin to drink."

The men from San Juan have already drunk plenty. They ask Constantino Martinez' brother what he brings with him from the hot country. Just bananas, he tells them, and gives them all bananas. But he knows and they know that a pedlar returning from a long trip carries with him the money he has made. Constantino Martinez says:

"They give him more and more mescal, and he takes it, as somebody says, in order not to offend them. Then one of the men insults him. He cannot tolerate that. He is about to strike the man, and the others take hold of him and push him down the hillside." The man who had insulted him takes up a rifle and shoots at him. "He shot five times, but he did not hit him. Then my brother comes back up to the trail. He takes out his machete and strikes the man in the neck. He killed him. The other four men are scared. They ran off."

After Constantino Martinez' brother arrived that afternoon in San Pedro, he and Constantino and their youngest brother took their wives and children to one of their ranchos (huts) in the mountains above the village. All twelve of them spent the first night in one rancho. The men stood guard. The next day, Constantino Martinez and the brother who had killed the man took their families to another rancho six hours further away, far from any trail, where no one would ever come by accident. The third day, the brother who had killed the man took his family and headed east by the mountain route to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Brothers of the dead man came to San Pedro looking for the killer. Not finding him, they looked for his brothers. All had fled to the ranchos. The men from San Juan did not dare go up to the ranchos after them. Constantino

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Martinez says he and his brother and their families stayed at their ranchos for about a year. The women occasionally walked to San Pedro for supplies. Then the youngest brother returned with his family to San Pedro, but Constantino Martinez stayed away another six months. Then he began to make furtive visits to San Pedro by night. A year and a half after the killing, he determined that it was safe to return home. He brought his family back to San Pedro.

A few weeks ago, Constantino Martinez rode with me from San Pedro to Oaxaca. As usual, we passed groups of men and mules returning from Miahuatlán, the local market town. Each time a group approached us, Constantino Martinez slid down in his seat and turned his head away from them, but stole a quick look as they passed. One time he covered his face with his hand. When the men were behind us, he told me that one of them had been among the four companions of the man his brother had killed. No one has seen that brother since the day he left the rancho for the Isthmus. That was 14 years ago.

About the same time, the brother-in-law of Constantino Martinez left San Pedro under pressure and has returned only twice since. He has a tidy house and steady work in the city of Oaxaca. He says he does not return to San Pedro because he has no reason to. Constantino Martinez says his brother-in-law will not risk returning because in San Pedro he has many contrarios. Unlike Constantino Martinez, the brother-in-law has never been in danger of attack from the family of the man from San Juan. The rules of revenge do not sanction vendettas against in-laws. The brother-in-law, according to Constantino Martinez, fears that one of his contrarios in San Pedro might drink too much, remember past political disputes, and do him violence. To explain why his brother-in-law has so many contrarios in San Pedro, Constantino Martinez told me his version of the story of the war between San Pedro and San Juan.

In 1927, a certain San Pedro native returned to the village after a stint with the Mexican army in the city of Oaxaca. "He had his bugle and his rifle and a horse. He organized the men of San Pedro. On Sundays they form lines and march in the plaza. He knows a lot. He was, as somebody says, the jefe (chief) then." (The jefe was the head of an informal home guard.)

The next year, 1928, a certain Pedruno noticed that apples were being stolen from his orchard, which stood near the boundary with San Juan. "One day he told the jefe. That night he and the jefe and another man go to the orchard and find a man from San Juan right up there in a tree. And close to the tree is a big basket. He is filling it up with apples. The jefe drew his gun and shot him. He fell out of the tree dead. That same night they carried him into San Juan and put him in the fountain in the middle of town.

"The next morning the jefe rides through San Pedro and calls the people to a meeting. He had his bugle and everything. He tells the people, 'We are going to round up all the livestock of San Juan.' So they go up into the mountains and bring in the animals. They kill some and everyone in San

Pedro ate meat. They put the rest in corrals. Oxen and cows that did not carry brands they branded with the brand of San Pedro. When the people of San Juan wake up that morning, they find the dead man in the fountain. Later they go to look for their animals on the mountain, but they do not find them. They are enraged."

For the next three years, the two villages-- of roughly equal size, separated from one another by only a ravine-- fought sporadic battles. San Juan represented itself as the innocent party and secured the help of military units from the city of Oaxaca. San Pedro gained a reputation, right or wrong, as one of the state's wild, aggressive villages, a menace to public order. (Now that reputation has been almost entirely scotched.) Facing the San Juan forces backed by troops supplied by the state, San Pedro agreed to a cease-fire in 1930.

During the war, the citizenry of San Pedro divided into two factions. The adherents of the flamboyant jefe favored continuing the fighting despite the heavy odds against winning. Moderate Pedrunos unhappy about the material cost of the war, particularly its interruption of free movement in and out of San Pedro by pedlars, favored an early cease-fire. In some instances the allegiance of a given family to one faction or another apparently was determined by pre-existing small-scale feuds within the village. That is, if before the war the Mendez family had immemorially quarreled with the Zaragozas, the two families took opposite sides in the hawk-dove split arising during the war. I have no evidence, however, that any village-wide division existed before the war.

After the 1930 cease-fire, the leader of the peace faction betrayed the San Pedro jefe into the hands of the army in the city of Oaxaca. No one knows what became of the jefe after that. People say he is occasionally glimpsed up in the mountains, like Zapata's horse a reminder that the struggle continues. In exchange for delivering up the jefe, the leader of the peace faction received recognition from military authorities in Oaxaca as the new jefe in San Pedro. Later he was elected President of San Pedro. During the New Year's Day ceremony marking his accession to the office, he was murdered by kin of the betrayed jefe.

Hostilities with San Juan and disputes between the two factions in San Pedro continued after the cease-fire. Although peace-faction families have been in the majority ever since the war, they did not assert their authority and sign a definitive peace with San Juan until the early 1950's. That peace embittered the minority faction, who were thereafter ostracized by the majority. Minority families were unfairly defeated, they claim, in the adjudication of private disputes by the municipal authorities precisely because of their association with the minority faction. Soon minority families began leaving San Pedro. Those who remained, now a still smaller minority, found the prejudice against them increasing. A few were reconciled with the peace faction and today hold top municipal offices. But most have long since left San Pedro under duress. Many settled in the city of Oaxaca, among them the brother-in-law of Constantino Martinez.

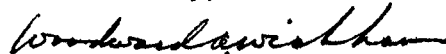
The uncle of Constantino Martinez has established a prosperous business as a tailor in the city of Oaxaca. He employs his own three sons, two nephews, and a changing population of young Pedrunos who come to Oaxaca for temporary wage-work. The uncle moved out of San Pedro ten years ago. He returns as unobtrusively as possible only when urgent business there makes it necessary. His is a classic dispute with the town government. It concerns land.

Land in the municipality of San Pedro has not been redistributed under the ejido system that emerged during the land reforms following the Mexican Revolution. The majority of the territory of San Pedro-- pine and oak forest, rocky gorges, and a few upland meadows-- is public land held by the municipal government for the common good of the people. It is used for grazing. Permission is given to Pedrunos to cut wood on public lands only if it is to be used privately, not sold for profit. The rest of the territory-- houseplots, cultivated land, and orchards-- is privately owned by individual families. The uncle of Constantino Martinez claims to have put together, through inheritance and shrewd purchases, a large parcel (200 acres) of forest in the midst of public lands.

About ten years ago, he offered the timber on this parcel to a private logging company. Before he could complete the sale, the municipal authorities forbade him to sell. The uncle insisted that the land was his, and produced documents establishing his title. The town authorities recalled that some years earlier the official rubber stamps of the municipality had been stolen from the President as he walked to the market town. Although they were soon recovered, documents have since turned up that appear to have been forged with the stolen stamps. The authorities told the uncle that because the stamps had once been stolen, his documents were not necessarily valid. They denied that he had the right to sell his timber.

Of course the authorities were members of the majority faction. Constantino Martinez' uncle, like all the Martinez family, is identified with the faction that opposed the peace with San Juan, the minority faction. Constantino Martinez says that the opposition to his uncle's selling his timber was rooted in factional prejudice.

Sincerely,



Woodward A. Wickham

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