

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-28 Conflict in San Pedro: One Who Tries to Stay

Apartado 27  
Ocotlán, Oaxaca  
México  
30 September, 1975

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

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Constantino Martinez and I had been on our way from Oaxaca to San Pedro, during the last few days of the rainy season, when the jeep became hopelessly mired in tons of earth and uprooted trees deposited on the road by a landslide. Together we walked home three hours along the road that follows the mountain ridge from San Agustín through San Juan to San Pedro. When we set out, I said to Constantino that I thought we should hurry while there was still some daylight. He said we were lucky, later there would be moonlight. I said I thought not, since we seemed to be walking in a thick cloud. Night fell quickly, the full moon rose, and its light easily penetrated the mist around us.

I marched along the road straight, slopping through deep mud, walking boldly over long stretches of sharp rock exposed by the running rainwater. I was happy in my high-laced, waterproof leather American boots, triple-stitched. Constantino Martinez, 50, skipped about in muddy sandals, zigzagging from one patch of firm ground to another, covering twice the distance I walked, but never out of breath. Among these people, the ability to keep up an entertaining chatter on long walks is a valued social grace. Constantino Martinez, usually a taciturn man, kept my mind off the work of walking most of the way.

"Often on nights like these I walk alone from one of my ranchos down to San Pedro," he says. "I leave about eight at night, and arrive at four, sometimes with no moon at all. But, as somebody says, there is always light. Who knows where it comes from? One can always see, even when there is no moon.... I know the trails all over these mountains. I am not afraid to walk at night. For some people it is dangerous to walk by day.... One time when you walk up to the lake and the big mountain, you should go by my rancho. I have two, one right up near the lake, and the other far away, on the other side of the mountain, past the trail that goes to the coast. Maybe you can go by my rancho near the lake and tell me what I can plant there. It is very cold there. As somebody says, the only thing one can plant there is potatoes. Maybe you will go and look at the soil and tell me what kind of potato I can plant. The potato I plant now is just a little one, and it does not yield much. I think there is a big kind that will grow better up there. Maybe you will show me."

We come across another landslide. Skirting it on the downhill side, we grab onto brush and saplings to keep from slipping down the muddy mountainside. Constantino Martinez accidentally steps out of his sandals, stuck in the mud. He picks them up and continues barefoot, dancing back and forth around me as

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before.

"I do not think we will see any duendes (elves). I usually walk at night when I come down from my ranchos, and I have never seen a duende. People see duendes, but me, I do not see them. As somebody says, they are creatures of the night. They are animals of the darkness. That is, well, of the Devil. I am not afraid, and they know that, so they do not bother me. If one is fearful, they approach. If one is not afraid, they do not come near him."

We hear voices ahead and the noise of pack animals. Constantino Martinez stops talking. He pulls his hat down over his forehead. I can see six mules loaded with firewood and three men. Like us, they are walking toward San Juan. Constantino Martinez hangs back. I am twenty yards ahead of him when I reach the men. We greet each other. They speak with the tone of San Juan.

"Where did you go?"

"I went to Oaxaca. Where did you go?"

"We went to bring firewood."

We talk a little as we walk along together. They are moving at a mule's pace. I am in a hurry. I walk on ahead, hissing "Mula!" at the mules when they try to crowd me off the road. Once I am past them, I turn to look for Constantino Martinez. Suddenly he is close behind me, walking in my footsteps, like a shadow.

When a curve has put the men from San Juan out of earshot, Constantino Martinez begins talking again. "People run into duendes up here, and they can bother people a lot. But that is only because people are afraid...."

When I returned to the jeep the next day about noon, I found Constantino Martinez already there cutting trees to strengthen the roadbed where the car would have to pass when we backed it out of the mud. I had decided to return to Oaxaca. Before dawn, Constantino Martinez had delivered money, in behalf of his two sons working in Oaxaca, to his two daughters-in-law living with their children in San Pedro. Then he slipped out of the village before most people had eaten breakfast. I doubt many people saw him.

One of the daughters-in-law had recently given birth. "I came home to help her. My son is very busy. I thought I would stay in town until she recovered. But it seems she is nearly well already. It has been three weeks.... Also, I want to go up and see how things are at my rancho. I have some apple trees up there. It is time to pick apples. But if you will be so kind as to take me with you to Oaxaca, maybe I will go back. Maybe I should go back to Oaxaca."

When we had freed the jeep and turned it toward the valley, I told Constantino I would be glad if he would accompany me on the drive back to Oaxaca. "Are you going to delay in Miahuatlán," he asked, "or will you go straight to Oaxaca?" I said I planned to go straight to Oaxaca. "You will not stay long in Miahuatlán, then?" I repeated that I would go straight through. My answer seemed to be decisive for him. "Good," he said. "I will go with you. If you will be so kind." Since then I have learned why he avoids Miahuatlán.

While talking about others in San Pedro, Constantino Martinez has led me to understand that he himself once committed a crime that has profoundly influenced

his life. I rarely ask people in San Pedro about their lives and lives of their neighbors. It is one of the luxuries of my situation that I can simply live in the village and listen without prying. People are surprisingly forthcoming. Constantino Martinez has never spoken explicitly to me about his "problem," but the references he makes to it indicate that he wants me to know about it. The following allusions arose in conversations we had on four different occasions.

"I am not afraid to travel alone. I have travelled as far as Pinotepa Nacional by myself. Not as a pedlar. I do not work as a pedlar. When I-- as somebody says, when I had that problem, I went far away, all alone, and I always found work. One can always find work if one is smart. I went to Puerto Escondido, I went to Pochutla, I went to Huajuapán. I was away from San Pedro six months, working far away."

"People say life is very sad in the ranchos. Me, I like it. There are no problems there. When I am in my rancho, nobody comes by. It is very far from the trail. There are potatoes, there are apple trees. We always have corn, we have beans, we have wild herbs. I kill deer. I kill rabbit. It is very cold, but I like it.... My wife and I lived in my rancho for four years, when I came back after my problem. My second son was born up there. (He is now 19.) When I had that problem, I went alone and worked all over. Then we went to the rancho. Up there, nobody visits. It is very peaceful. Up there, as somebody says, there are no problems."

"I felt very bad, because I know it is wrong. It is a bad thing. Then the man's brother died. Then his family left San Pedro. They do not turn up in San Pedro anymore. We moved back to the village. I do not get mixed up in anything there. I do not go to the center of town. We live in our house. I do not look for problems.... Then one day the President sees me and he says, 'You, why do you not come into town? Do not worry,' the President tells me, 'that matter is finished now. We know. That was a bad man. They are bad people. Do not worry.' So I begin to go to town. I go and work with the others on the school and the roads. People see me. Nobody says anything."

"There is only one left from that family. But he is not in San Pedro. He is the man's cousin. He lives in Miahuatlán. Once we met on a street in Miahuatlán. He is very poor. He is young. I am not afraid of him. But I do not look for problems. One never knows. I do not go to Miahuatlán."

Constantino Martinez says that he used to be afraid. About six years ago, he says, he cured himself of a long illness, and at the same time overcame his fears. At first he only felt a little weakness from time to time. Then he lost his appetite. He spent most days indoors. After four months, he became frighteningly thin. He did not suffer any pain or any physical symptoms. He says he was not drinking alcohol. Soon he was bedridden. At most he would sit in the doorway of his house half an hour a day. His wife brought healers from San Pedro and San Juan, but he did not improve. He went to a doctor in Miahuatlán, who gave him several injections. He felt better for about two weeks, but then fell ill again.

"So I said to myself one day, 'Now there is no remedy left. It looks like I am going to die.' So I say to myself, 'They say that if one gives everything to the Lord, He can save you.' Now I used to be one of the town musicians. I used to sing in Latin. Then I sang in Spanish, when they

changed it. So every day, every morning and every evening, I prayed and sang. 'O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.' I gave all my problems to the Lord. I said, 'I am giving You my sickness. I am giving You my problems. From now on I am not going to worry. I am not going to be afraid.' I did that for several months. Little by little I began to eat. It worked. I began to do some chores. Since then I am not afraid. That is the way it is."

Still, Constantino Martinez is scarcely free to move and live where he chooses. About a year ago I drove Constantino Martinez and his ailing wife from San Pedro to Oaxaca. I remember wondering, on the morning we left, why he carried her up the mountainside and across the ridge rather than downhill a short distance to where the others boarded my jeep. By nature a tiny woman, she was then swollen with edema. She weighed more than a hundred pounds. It took him half an hour to carry her the long, back way out of town to the road. When we arrived, they had been sitting there waiting in the pre-dawn cold for a long time. She was shivering. Probably no one had seen them leave.

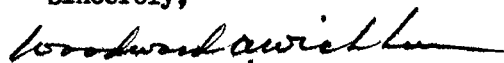
I had told them that I did not know what disease the wife had, but that I would take them to Oaxaca and help them get diagnosis and treatment. We talked it over. What if she died on the road, they asked. What if she died in Oaxaca? They decided to go.

She died in Oaxaca, about five weeks later. She had monocytic leukemia. She waited three weeks in the hospital and two weeks in the home of her husband's sister and brother-in-law (the one who fled under pressure from the peace faction), but the powerful and expensive medicine that sometimes causes remissions never arrived from Mexico City. We talked about taking her back to San Pedro. It seemed a long way. As Constantino Martinez' sister said: "And once she is there, what is there for her? Her family, but we are family, too. And here she has a good house, and there is always food. Here there are medicines." She was buried in Oaxaca.

Arriving in Oaxaca after our trip down from the landslide that day, Constantino Martinez said: "Today I am feeling sadness. I scarcely feel sadness anymore, but today, yes, I feel sad. It was just a year ago that we brought my señora down. Before, we had our house in San Pedro. I always had someone to make my tortillas. Even when there was not much, up there in our rancho, she always made something. Now it is not the same. She liked the rancho very much. Now, for me to go to the rancho alone, I have to take my tortillas with me. I cannot go for many days. It is not the same.

"In Oaxaca I have family. We are a big family. There are 300 of us. Almost all in Oaxaca. I like San Pedro, but who is there for me? In Oaxaca they say, 'Come and live with us,' but that is not for me. They all have their señoras, but I, as somebody says, I am just watching. I like San Pedro. But there people speak badly of us. I have family in Miahuatlán. They say, 'Come and live with us,' but the cousin of that man is there. You do not have something for me to do, by chance? A farm somewhere that I can look after?"

Sincerely,



Woodward A. Wickham