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A Personal Truth Commission

Background interview with Lotte Holmen
Director of Para Nunca Olvidar - "Never to Forget"

Danish radio reporter Lotte Holmen, spend four months traversing the outback of Guatemala to have people tell her about their sufferings during 36 years of cruel civil war. By way of her microphone, they spoke to their compatriots and to the world. This collection of recorded "personal testimonies" from the civil war is to be broadcast in Spanish (and other languages) to the public in Guatemala. The goal is for the whole world to get the chance to hear these desperate voices.

"I wanted to give Guatemalans access to their own history, and to participate in a process of cleansing. Since most of the Mayans are illiterate, radio is the perfect media", says Lotte Holmen, director of Para Nunca Olvidar. "I also believe that the world should be aware of, and learn from, the horrors of Guatemala." The world will learn - online.

The United Nations established a Truth Commission in Guatemala (which published its report in 1999), and the Catholic Church published a massive report ("Nunca Mas") on the issue in 1998. Their huge undertakings collected about 7-8000 interviews each. Yet no information from these reports have reached the general (illiterate) public.

"It is essential that people can speak about their own past. We all need not only to be able to maintain our past, but also to analyze and express our opinion about it. Many people, many of the actual victims of the tremendous violence that Guatemala experienced, have lived years, even decades, without being able to talk about these horrible experiences", says Fernando Castañón, secretary general of the UN Truth Commission in Guatemala.

He goes on to say, "I find the Para Nunca Olvidar initiative is a very important contribution, and is in line with our recommendations. I think that it's essential that this kind of work is actually disseminated - so that we all become aware of the magnitude of the violence. The Commission could only analyze a few of the cases of violence and human rights violation. Only a few, not all of the cases came to the knowledge of the Commission."

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Very touching human stories

"I stayed in Guatemala for four month this winter, and made 35 interviews with Mayan Indians all over the country - victims of the civil war. The interviews are very touching human stories in which the Indians tell about torture, cruelty and all kind of human rights violations", Lotte Holmen explains.

"Most of the people told me that they have never voiced their stories anywhere - not even in private! All of them are very scared (especially after the results of last year's presidential elections), and therefore all those interviewed are, and will remain anonymous. So you might call my project a personal 'truth commission' for the victims," adds Lotte Holmen.

Sixteen of the interviews have been edited into radio programs of 17 - 30 minutes each. They will be broadcast by FGER (Federación Guatemalteca Escuela Radiofonica) in Spanish and in various native languages. These broadcasts are intended to initiate an on-the-air debate so that no one forgets. These radio events are also expected to encourage the population to speak openly with confidence - and to look for a future without violence.

Telling the stories to the world

There is quite a lot of knowledge about rehabilitation of victims of torture and other traumas. Indeed the Catholic church human rights office in Guatemala (ODHAG), supported by the Danish Center of Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (RCT), run a very large "psycho social" rehabilitation project in Guatemala. They expect to reach 8,000 people in 4 years.

The coordinator for RCT's Latin America office, Finn Kjaerulf, states that "Guatemala has had two truth commissions: one conducted by the United Nations, the second by the Church, and now comes Para Nunca Olvidar - the latter to reach the most people and especially the young." The "testimonies" will also be distributed on audio CDs to libraries and schools all over Guatemala.

A new website, located at www.para-nunca-olvidar.org, uses internet-based audio to transmit 8 excerpts from the testimonials - illustrated with hundreds of photos of the "faceless victims." The site also contains transcripts of the testimonials in both English and Spanish. Colleges, universities and others world wide will be able to request copies of the collection online.

Para Nunca Olvidar was supported by Amnesty International, The Foreign ministry of Denmark, The SiD trade union, and The Danish Foundation for Journalists.

A twenty year veteran of making radio documentaries, Lotte Holmen did a forerunner project in El Salvador in 1997. Those programs are broadcasted every year (on Peace Day) and are publicly available in el Museo de la Palabra (the Museum of the Word) in San Salvador.

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The site is optimized for streaming audio on ISDN and faster (but may run well with 56k modems depending on local bandwidth conditions). Users may download mp3 files for offline listening.

Pictures of Lotte Holmen and from Guatemala are available upon request.