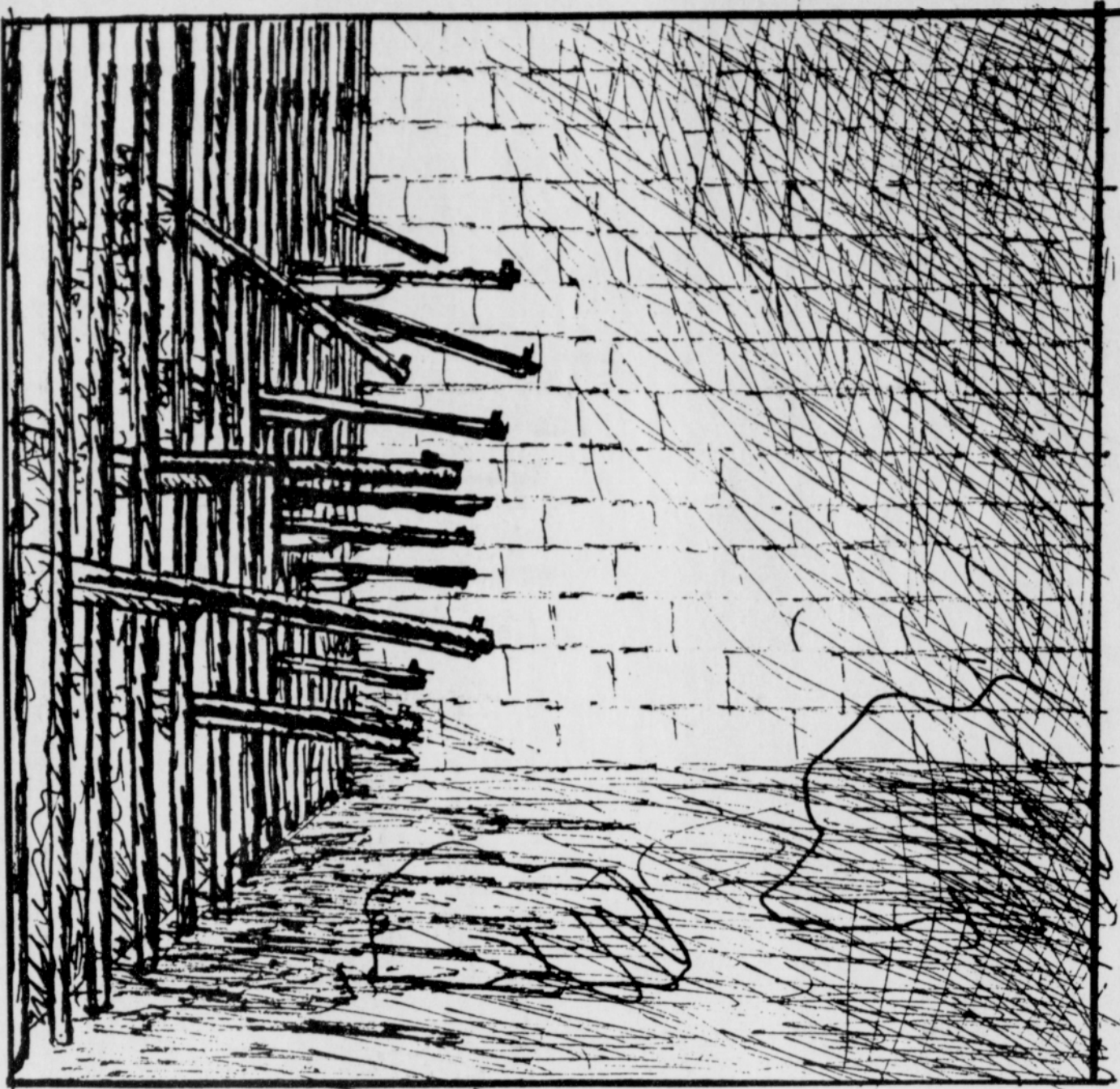


A VISIT TO GULAG HONDURAS



PHILIPPE WEISBECKER

In April I traveled to Honduras with three other people from the East Bay Sanctuary Convent, a group of thirty churches of many denominations in northern California that offer protection to refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador. Our mission was to visit the Guatemalan and Salvadoran refugees in the camps in Honduras to determine their concerns and needs at this time, to express our solidarity and perhaps ensure their safety by our presence, and to find out how we can aid them in their plan to repatriate their home country. We were asked to contact CODEH, the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Honduras, to document the rising repression and determine if there is a need to also offer sanctuary to Hondurans. We were warned to tell no one who we were and where we were going, to not talk politics, be respectful to the military, never go out alone, etc.

By choice we arrived in Honduras during a time of intense anti-American expression. On the bus leaving Tegucigalpa, the first of many buses and trucks we had to take to reach the remote refugee camps, the driver had the radio tuned to news. High-pitched emotional voices denounced yankee imperialism and the kidnapping of Juan Matta, an accused drug lord, by the DEA to Mariona prison. It is not that Hondurans love Matta, but his extradition was against the Constitution, Congress was not consulted, and it was but another example of U.S. violation of Honduran national sovereignty. Everyone on the bus leaned forward, silent and grim, listening to the denunciation of the U.S.A., while I felt like sinking through the floor.

The next day, after we had reached the refugee camp, two thousand people, mostly college and high school students, attacked and burned the U.S. embassy. Although the protest was called by rightwing students protesting Matta's kidnapping, it soon spread and was joined by others with many other resentments against the U.S. For two days crowds rioted in the streets, attacking and American or

by Lois Morford

westerner they saw, spraying graffiti on every building in the city. Americans were evacuated from the luxury hotels and taken to private homes for their safety. Even longtime American residents doing relief or Peace Corps work had to hide their vehicles, remove the license plates, close their offices and hide out in their homes, sending Hondurans out for food and supplies. Although Matta's kidnapping touched off the riots, the graffiti expressed other resentments against the U.S.:

"i Fuera Gringo Basura!" (Get Out of Here Gringo Garbage!)

"i Fuera Contra Asesinos!" (Get Out of Here Contra Assassins!)

"Moises Vive!" (Moses Lives!)

The Hondurans view the Contras as more of a threat to themselves than to Nicaragua and are angry at President Azcona for not ousting them as he promised. They do not believe that they were invaded by Nicaragua in March, but if they are invaded they feel perfectly competent to repel the invasion themselves with the huge and well equipped Honduran army the U.S. has provided. They deeply resent that March invasion of more than three thousand U.S. troops parachuting into their country and the subsequent proliferation of prostitution, AIDS, and another venereal disease they call the flower of VietNam. Moses Landaverde was a very popular theater director and peace activist/musician who was assassinated along with a top CODEH human rights activist in January. Hondurans were outraged, reacting as Ameri-

cans did to the assassinations of the Kennedys and Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., and also blame the U.S. for the murders as the terror was begun and is carried out by special Honduran military forces trained in the United States.

The military, with tanks, finally restored order, and except for the graffiti Tegucigalpa was calm when we returned ten days later after a grueling but inspiring journey to three remote refugee camps.

The two men of our delegation returned to the U.S. on schedule but Ruth, a seventy year old whitehaired political activist from Anchorage, Alaska, and myself opted to stay over and contact CODEH.

The morning before our departure I phoned the office, explained who we were and where we had been and asked for an interview. I was told to go to the big black gate behind the supermarket by the Plaza Dolores. There were no signs or markings but a nearby vendor showed us the bell. The suspicious man who finally answered hesitated before unlocking the gate: there were fresh bullet holes through the windows from a recent attack by the DNI (National Director of Intelligence — like our FBI).

I expected to be given literature on the current human rights situation and hopefully talk with someone about the necessity of sanctuary for Honduran refugees. But Oscar Puento, the CODEH vice president, had his own agenda. "When are you leaving Honduras?" was his first question. Tomorrow morning. "What are you doing this afternoon?" was the next. We told him we had an appointment with a Presbyterian minister at 3 p.m. Puento told us he wanted us to go to the central penitentiary to visit some students who had been held and tortured by the DNI. They were accused of burning the U.S. embassy but they were innocent. He wanted us to talk with them, witness their torture, and alert the human rights groups in the U.S. to send telexes to obtain their release. Visiting hours were 2 - 3 p.m. He told us to go as religious ladies from the U.S., to carry Bibles, to say we were there to give them words of comfort for their torture. He phoned the penitentiary to tell the guards we were coming, and gave us a list of the students' names, ages and occupations.

Frankly, I did not feel I understood the political and military situation in Honduras well enough to know if we should go to the penitentiary or not. If we could help the brave people of CODEH and human rights we wanted to, but not if we would threaten our own security or future visas. So from a pay-phone in a tourist mall (although Ruth and I were the only tourists on the streets of Tegucigalpa) I phoned Sara, our contact at the religious agency that arranged our visit to the refugee camps. I told her of CODEH's request and asked if we should do it. Her answer: follow your conscience. After some hesitation her answer was go for it but don't mention the name of her agency! Contact with the students for human rights information was valuable, but her agency would be compromised in its work by any attention from the DNI.

So we rushed back to our hotel to become religious ladies before 2 p.m. The evening before we had met and exchanged information with Wolfgang Moller, a West German from Boston on his way to the refugee camps. He was in his room, so I asked if he had a Bible and explained the situation. He didn't, but ran out to buy some for us, and when he returned told us he was a correspondent for Pacifica Radio News and would like to go to the penitentiary with us. I eagerly accepted his offer as I thought Ruth and I might be safer with a man along. We dressed in the best clothes from our packs and with much apprehension, Bibles in hand, we took a cab to the penitentiary.

The guards were expecting us and opened the big iron gates. Our Bibles were our tickets, but Wolfgang had to show his passport. We

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