

# Surviving the Death Squads in El Salvador

by Mariela Bustamante

I was ten years old when the death squads came. They knocked on the door and asked for my father, Esteban Ardon. They asked him for identification.

The family was asleep. "Shh. Don't make any noise," my mother told us. My great-grandmother woke up and said, "Come, everybody. Outside." My mother said, "Please. No. We should hide!"

But my great-grandmother argued, "We are his family. We must stay with him every moment. We can't leave him alone. We must fight for him and stand next to him." My great-grandmother got a lantern and said to all of us, "Quick. Your father is outside."

My great-grandmother said to the crowd of men, "What are you looking for?" She cried and asked many things. Then she held up the lantern. The light shone on a face she recognized. She said, "I know you. You are my son."

My great-uncle said, "Mother. You are my mother!"

She cried, "What are you doing?" She had not seen her son for many years. And now he was a member of the death squads, coming to take away his own family member. My great-grandmother was shocked, but she stood up to her son. "If you take Esteban, you will have to kill me first."

He said, "Go inside the house."

She said, "No. Go away. Leave my grandson alone."

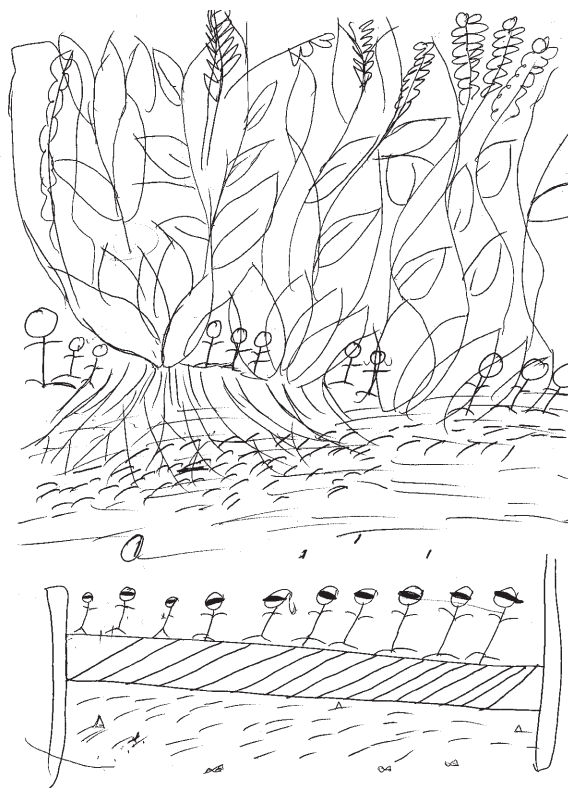
We all cried. My great-grandmother cried for her son. Her son cried for his mom. I cried for my dad. My mom cried for her husband. My dad cried for all of us. My great-grandmother was strong. "I will not permit this disgrace. You will have to kill me before you take away my grandson."

Finally, he ordered the death squad to leave.

We were stronger than they were, even though we didn't have any weapons. Why? Because we weren't thinking about ourselves. My great-grandmother only thought about her grandson. My dad only thought about us. I only thought about my dad. We were all prepared to die.

From the time they came for my father, we could not sleep in our house because we knew the death squads would come back and that we could not survive another visit from them. Whenever we heard the death squads had come to our village, we never asked, "Who did they kill?" We asked, "Is anyone still living?"

We spent every night hiding in a nearby lake,



*Mariela's drawing shows how her family hid in the lake at night. Below, people on the bridge are blindfolded before being executed by the death squads.*

up to our necks in water. We held on to lake plants, and hid in their roots and leaves. Using her mind and imagination, my great-grandmother found a way to feed us even there.

Before we left our house, she wrapped tortillas in cloth and put them inside a plastic bag. She tied the bag very tightly and hid it in the weeds and trees by the side of the lake. She tied one end of a string to the bag and the other end of the string to her big toe before she waded into the lake with the rest of us. In the middle of the dark night, when she felt it was safe, she pulled the string off her toe and quietly followed it back to where she hid the tortillas. Then she brought them back and fed us.

The death squads sometimes lined people up on the bridge and shot them. Their bodies fell into the water and at times floated to where we were hiding. My father was so strong. He could pull a body towards us if we needed to hide behind it. Or he could disentangle it from the roots so that it could float by.

My great-grandmother died five years after they came for my father. She said, "It is painful to have a son. It is painful to lose a son." She told us that if we ever saw her son, we should tell him that she forgave him. She was at peace. She asked for a tortilla with lime and salt, and then she passed away.

Peace eventually came to our region, but we had to leave because of the economy. There were no jobs. We survived the death squads and the war, but we could not survive the economy. I am not ready to forgive the death squads. Maybe someday, but not now.

I remember how strong my great-grandmother made us become because we only thought of one another. I don't wait until tomorrow to give whatever I can. Tomorrow might not come. Tomorrow doesn't exist. I have to make peace today—just as my great-grandmother did.

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## El Salvadoran Death Squads

In its 1993 final report, the U.N.-sponsored Truth Commission investigating human rights abuses presented a detailed history of the death squads. Excerpts from the report are presented below.

El Salvador [a country in Central America] has a long history of violence committed by groups that are neither part of the Government nor ordinary criminals. This has been reflected, throughout the country's history, in a pattern of conduct by the government and power elites of using violence as a means to control civilian society.

Between 1967 and 1979, General Jose Alberto Medrano, who headed the National Guard, organized the paramilitary group known as ORDEN to identify and eliminate alleged communists among the rural population. He also organized the national military intelligence agency, ANSESAL. These institutions sowed terror selectively among alleged subversives identified by the intelligence services. . . .

The overthrow of the government by young military officers in 1979 ushered in a new period of intense violence. Various circles in the armed forces

and the private sector vied for control of the repressive apparatus. Hundreds and even thousands of people perceived as supporters or active members of a growing guerrilla movement...were murdered.

Members of the army, the Treasury Police, the National Guard, and the National Police formed "squads" to do away with enemies. Private and semiofficial groups also set up their own squads or linked up with existing structures within the armed forces. ...While it is possible to differentiate the armed forces death squads from the civilian death squads, the borderline between the two was often blurred.

Paramilitary: of, relating to, or being a group of civilians organized in a military fashion, especially to operate in place of or assist regular army troops. (From <www.dictionary.com>)