MEMORIA VIVA

Photographs and Testimonies About Life in
La Virtud and Mesa Grande Refugee Camps, 1980-1992

This book is dedicated to those who died in the struggle, from the mountains of El Salvador to the refugee camps in Honduras.


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Photographs and Testimonies About Life in La Virtud and Mesa Grande Refugee Camps, 1980-1992

First English Edition, 2020
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Content

On March 24th,
the church is shaken.
The seeds of Óscar Arnulfo Romero
keep fermenting.
Because you are the fragrance
of the gospel's flower.
Because you are a little petal
forcefully torn off.
Because of that, the church
is in mourning on the 24th.

On this day, March 24th,
we remember two unforgettable days:
first, the crossing of the Lempa River;
second, the death of Óscar Arnulfo Romero.
We are here because of that.
You would say
in your homilies:
"I am the voice of my people."
You knew about your own death.
You would speak about your fate.

On this day, the 24th,
we, the refugees,
remember your life
and the crossing of seven thousand.

We crossed a river of grief;
There death appeared,
When the bomb exploded,
everybody called out: "They are killing me."
Everybody jumped into the river;
many did not come out.

We reached Los Hernández
asking: "Where is my child?"
We spent ten days there
resting in the fields.
They lent us a hand.
By good fortune, it was summer.

Then we went to La Virtud;
where we spent a year.
Monsignor Romero:
they sent you to heaven,
and they sent us to this land.

You are the voice
crying out in the wilderness
You are like a lit fuse;
if blown out, it smokes more.
Let your voice not be taken away from you.
There is no control in this land.
They sent you to heaven
to keep you from speaking to the people.

"The Lit Fuse"
Norberto "Don Tito" Amaya

Refugee Camp. La Virtud, Honduras. 1981. Archive of Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen. C. G. Palazzo.

PREFACE

This community book poses an essential question: Why do we have to recount our history? Our history is made up of many stories that Salvadorans – particularly the survivors of government repression and massacres – must tell. During the civil war, many of us were forced to leave El Salvador and seek refuge in Honduras, first in Honduran border villages, then in La Virtud refugee camp, and, finally, beginning in 1982, in Mesa Grande refugee camp. This book includes photographs of the refugee experience as well as testimonies about the departure from El Salvador, daily life in the refugee camps, and the repopulation of El Salvador beginning in 1987.

There were more than ten thousand refugees in Mesa Grande, which was split into seven sub-camps. The high level of organization in the camps facilitated the distribution of food and medicine provided by international organizations such as the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), SHARE, Oxfam, Caritas, and Doctors Without Borders. People worked collectively in food preparation, vegetable production, education, health clinics, cleaning, and so on. There were also masses, music concerts, and dances to lift up our spirits. Everybody gathered for weekly assemblies to openly discuss issues and solve problems.

Today, we can learn a lot from La Virtud and Mesa Grande and the organic organization that benefited every person in the camp. The daily way of life in the camps, depicted in the following pictures, included the elderly, the youth, and the children. How can we continue to narrow this generation gap so this social interaction does not disappear? How will our future generations learn about the struggles during the war?

It is important that we recount our memories. We must ask how the struggle began, the causes of the departure from El Salvador, and the process of the return and repopulation of the

communities in which we now live. This book is one step in the journey to rescue our historical memory and to ensure that our stories are disseminated both inside El Salvador and abroad.

Many times we have seen that it is easier to fall into a state of amnesia, to forget our memories and histories, than to immerse ourselves in sharing, listening to, and reading testimonies. Although it is difficult, this process is necessary to keep our commitment to those who went before us because without them, we would not be here.

This photobook represents a recommitment to historical memory – through conversatorios, testimonies, and education – in the communities of the municipality of Suchitoto. We are grateful to the municipality and to Mayor Pedrina Rivera, who has provided support in all these endeavours and has been involved in this project since its inception. As a result of this project, we are now forming historical memory committees in every community in the municipality to continue discussion and documentation. In the words of Mayor Rivera, "People who forget their history are bound to repeat it."

Ángela Velasco
María Alba Serrano
Sonia González Castellano
Noé Vladimir Hernández

INTRODUCTION

The seeds for this project were planted eight years ago during a chance meeting in a café in Toronto between Dr. Meyer Brownstone, the former Chair of Oxfam Canada, and Reynaldo Hernández, a Salvadoran who migrated to Canada as a refugee in 1991. In 1980, the Hernández family fled their home in Cabañas, where they – like so many other *campesinos* and *campesinas* – were subjected to disappearances, assassinations, torture, and frequent aerial bombardments by the army of the Salvadoran government. This violent state repression was the government's response to the social and political organization of the people, who recognized vast inequalities in Salvadoran society and who rose up to claim their rights to education, health, land, and resources. After months of hiding in El Salvador, the Hernández family crossed the Lempa River into Honduras, where they were generously sheltered by a Honduran family. Eventually, they were moved to La Virtud refugee camp, where they lived for approximately eighteen months. In 1982, La Virtud was closed and all of the camp's inhabitants were relocated to Mesa Grande, a larger refugee camp located further away from the Salvadoran border. There they lived for many years.

In his capacity as Chair of Oxfam Canada, Brownstone led many solidarity delegations to the refugee camps in Honduras in the 1980s, where he took hundreds of photographs. He was particularly interested in documenting daily life in the camps, and the strength, industriousness, and resilience of the refugees who lived there. He photographed food preparation, farming practices, and workshops (hammock making, sewing, crafts, etc.). In January 1992, when the Chapultepec Peace Accords ended the war, the last of the refugees returned to El Salvador, and Brownstone put all of his photos and slides into a box in his basement. When he met Reynaldo Hernández nearly twenty years later, Brownstone pulled the box out of storage and invited him to his home to view the photographs. The images triggered many memories for Hernández. He dreamed that one day Brownstone's photos would be repatriated to El Salvador as a permanent memorial to the refugee experience.

In 2015, Hernández' partner, Dr. Amanda Grzyb, a professor of Information and Media Studies at Western University, served as

an international observer at a popular consultation on metallic mining in the community of Arcatao, El Salvador. There, she met local community leader Rosa Rivera Rivera, a member of Arcatao's Committee of Surviving Historical Memory, and US-based historian Dr. Molly Todd, who specializes in the history and memory of Salvadoran refugees and war survivors and their transnational support networks. After Grzyb recounted the story of Hernández and Brownstone's remarkable friendship, the three women discussed the idea of bringing Brownstone's photos to El Salvador and using the images as the foundation for a series of collaborative refugee memory workshops.

With research funding from Western University, Montana State University, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), and in-kind support from SalvAide Canada and CRIPDES (The Association for the Development of El Salvador), the idea rapidly evolved into an ambitious pilot project. With Brownstone's assistance and mentorship, the collection of images expanded to include an additional two hundred and sixty photographs from Oxfam Canada's archive; eighty children's drawings from Mesa Grande, curated by Canadian Linda Dale; private photos from Canadian musician, Bruce Cockburn, and the family of former Canadian Member of Parliament, Dan Heap; and photographs from American journalists, Steve Cagan, Adam Kufeld, and Linda Hess Miller. Dr. Emily Ansari, a professor of Music History at Western University, joined the team to provide support for research about the role of music during the civil war.

Pedrina Rivera, the Mayor of Suchitoto, welcomed the opportunity to collaborate on the project. Many of the communities in Suchitoto were repopulated by refugees from Mesa Grande, and the Mayor herself spent many years living in the camp. The municipality struck a special historical memory committee to guide the collaboration, and they worked closely with the international team over the intervening months to plan a commemorative journey to the site of Mesa Grande in Honduras, develop workshop themes, recruit participants, and organize the logistics. After a two-day trip to Mesa Grande in January 2017, the pilot workshops and inaugural photo exhibition were realized in the community of Milingo, and included participants from the

communities of Las Américas, Papaturro, Sitio Cenicero, Zacamil 1 and 2, Pepeshtenango, Los Henríquez, and Copapayo. The logistics for the event were organized by Ángela Velasco, Coordinator of Economic Development and Social Promotion in Suchitoto, Alfredo Marroquín, Executive Director of SalvAide Canada, and three community leaders from Milingo: María Alba Serrano, Sonia González Castellano, and Noé Vladimir Hernández.

Over three days, conversatorio participants engaged in rich and compelling group discussions about the departure from El Salvador, daily life in Mesa Grande, women's experiences, children's experiences, international solidarity, the role of music, popular education, social organization, health and wellness, and the return to El Salvador. Some of the participants chose to identify themselves by name in the conversatorio transcriptions, while others chose confidentiality. Some participants also provided individual video testimonies detailing their wartime memories. Many people recognized family members in the photo exhibition, which they were invited to caption with small post-it notes. Participation was intergenerational, from elderly community members with strong recollections of the war to those born in Mesa Grande to young children born long after the war ended. The workshops concluded with a celebration, music, and dancing, an event that was open to everyone in Milingo and the other communities.

After debriefing meetings in July 2017, the community leaders and the research team planned the next steps in the project: the development of a collaborative process for curating approximately fifty images from the larger exhibition to represent the collective story of the refugee experience from the perspective of the participants. In October 2017, six members of the international team joined a group of eleven community curators, who were elected by their communities to represent them in the photo curation process: José Esteban Rivas, Leónida Hernández Hernández, Ángela Veslaco, Kenia Mariela Orellana Cruz, María Alba Serrano, Sonia González Castellano, Reina Elizabeth Coreas Gómez, José Orlando Torres, Fancisco Madrid Recinos, Francisco García, and Tránsito Joaquín Hernández. Ulises Unda Lara, an Ecuadoran artist and then a Ph.D. Candidate in Visual Arts at Western University, led the group through a three-day curation

workshop process, which included telling stories with photographs, evaluating image quality, rationalizing which images to exclude from the exhibition, and, ultimately, working together to select photos for the final exhibition.

Over the next year, the international team transcribed the audio recordings from the January 2017 refugee memory workshops and worked closely with the community collaborators to select quotations that would illustrate the refugees' experiences. The quotations were then placed into a dialogue with the photographs selected previously through the community curation process. In January 2019, approximately fifty of the original workshop participants met again in Milingo for a full-day workshop – led by Jaime Brenes Reyes and Ángela Velasco – to review and revise the contents of this book, develop transitions between the book's sections, and provide an outline and structure for this Introduction. The four community leaders who organized the pilot workshops also undertook the writing of the book's Preface. In the pages that follow, the project's participants describe, in vivid detail, the government violence that precipitated the departure from El Salvador, the arrival in Honduras, daily life in La Virtud and Mesa Grande, and the return to El Salvador through the popular organization of the repopulation movement. The images reflect the struggles and resilience experienced by the refugees, some of whom lived in the refugee camps for more than a decade. Through the camera lenses of Brownstone, Oxfam staff, Steve Cagan, and Adam Kufeld, we are provided with a glimpse into the lives of Salvadoran refugees during the war. And through the children's drawings curated by Linda Dale in Mesa Grande, we have a glimpse into the horrors of state violence and massacre that were not documented by a camera. While many are familiar with the assassination of Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero, and the massacres at the Sumpul River, the Lempa River, and El Mozote, this book documents the daily reality for many Salvadorans who struggled and survived in the fog of war.

In tandem with the development of this book, the original project has continued to evolve in new directions. The Municipality of Suchitoto has established historical memory committees in many of

their repopulated communities, which continue to document local histories of the war. Juan Bello, the director of Triana Media, has collaborated with the Western team and Salvadoran musician, Norberto Amaya, to produce a short documentary film, *Norberto Amaya [Songwriter]*, about Amaya's role as a singer and songwriter during the war. Under the mentorship of psychiatrist and professor of Medicine, Dr. Arlene MacDougall, the international team has also initiated mental health and mindfulness training to respond to the stated needs of local communities still dealing with the traumatic impacts of the war. The international team has also worked with new community collaborators to mount additional historical memory conversatorios in the communities of Copapayo, Sitio Cenicero, and Las Vueltas.

After a long and active life in the service of social justice, Meyer Brownstone passed away on 3 April 2019 at the age of 96. Although he did not see this book in print before he died, he remained involved as a mentor for the project throughout the final months of his life. Brownstone's commitment to solidarity work lives on in the photographs he left behind, many of which are printed in the following pages. The collaborative work inspired by Brownstone and Reynaldo Hernández's friendship continues to widen and deepen, and the communities continue to strengthen their commitments to historical memory of the war, dignity for the victims, and education of the younger generations about this important time in Salvadoran history.

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

By 1980, the war had already started. The military repression against the *campesinos* and *campesinas* (subsistence farmers) included massacres and scorched earth operations. There were dozens of massacres of civilians, including the Sumpul River Massacre on May 14, 1980 (600 killed) and the Lempa River Massacre on March 17, 1981 (at least 200 people killed). Across the northern departments of El Salvador, people took refuge in underground shelters (*tatúes*) and fled and hid (*guindear*). Many were forced to seek protection and safety in Honduras. However, their commitment to the struggle never ended; it was a struggle they experienced firsthand. Their flight to Honduras was not a sign of weakness or surrender.

THE DEPARTURE

Courtesy of Linda Dale

"I was one of those who went across the Lempa River during the shooting. Many people drowned there; others were shot to death. I am one of those who, when we got to the Lempa River, decided to go back home. I went back when I heard the shooting, but they [civilian leaders] took us away again the same day. I thought that my mom or rather my parents had died because that was the rumour—that everybody had died. The same day, they took those of us who had returned home to Los Hernández [Honduras]. They were kind and welcomed us with good hearts. The same day, in the afternoon, they took us from where we were staying back to our places. We went across the Lempa River again. My mother and my family were very happy to see me because they thought that I had died."

Lucía Amaya

Courtesy of Linda Dale

"We were *campesinos*, we were people of the countryside. At the beginning we experienced a massive bombing. They [the government army] bombed us indiscriminately. The area where people lived ended up as scorched as in the day of judgement, as if the day of judgement had come. When people could no longer tolerate the war, they had to flee. We had to flee to Honduras."

Francisco Madrid Recinos

"Look, there were attacks by air and land that could last up to 6 hours. If they started at 12:00 p.m., they would end at 6:00 p.m. in the afternoon. All afternoon shooting and bombing. As a means of protection, people made what they called *tatúes*, which were holes in the ground where people would hide. So, when we were bombed, [the government forces] wouldn't know where we were unless they saw us going into the *tatú*. If they caught you going into the hole, they would drop the bomb right there. It was very tough."

Francisco Madrid Recinos and Anonymous Woman

Courtesy of Linda Dale

"Up to two hundred, three hundred people; some died on the road, mostly children, and we had to bury them by the road. Horrible things, but look, God helps people and we are here now."

Carlos García

"We had to flee and hide *[guindear]* almost every day. Sometimes men had to carry the wounded in hammocks… the wounded, childbearing women. It wasn't easy. Nobody could be left behind because if they were left behind, you wouldn't see them again. The [military] invasion scorched the earth."

María Alba Serrano

Courtesy of Adam Kufeld

"Fighting for a piece of land, here in our country, is what took us [to Honduras]. Because it was hard when the army started to implement their scorched earth tactics, under the guidance of the United States [government]. They had used these methods in Vietnam, and they wanted to do the same here. So many people died for their interests. There were huge massacres as well. First, there was the El Mozote Massacre in which more than one thousand people died. Then the Sumpul [Massacre], six hundred? The Copapayo Massacre, three hundred. All these massacres forced people to seek refuge. Life there was horrendous."

Otilio Ayala

Courtesy of Linda Dale

The rural communities on the Honduran border welcomed their Salvadoran *compañeras* and *compañeros* with affection and solidarity. The Salvadorans had survived repression, torture, bombardments and massacres. They were exhausted from the long journey. While some refugees reported attacks by the Honduran military, the Honduran people supported them and provided respite after so much violence.

ARRIVAL IN HONDURAN VILLAGES

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"When we reached Honduras, we entered the area of Los Hernández. People from Honduran communities supported us, but the Honduran army didn't. The Honduran army was allied with the Salvadoran army at that time. We stayed there for a few days and then we were transferred to La Virtud, where refugee camps were established."

Francisco Madrid Recinos

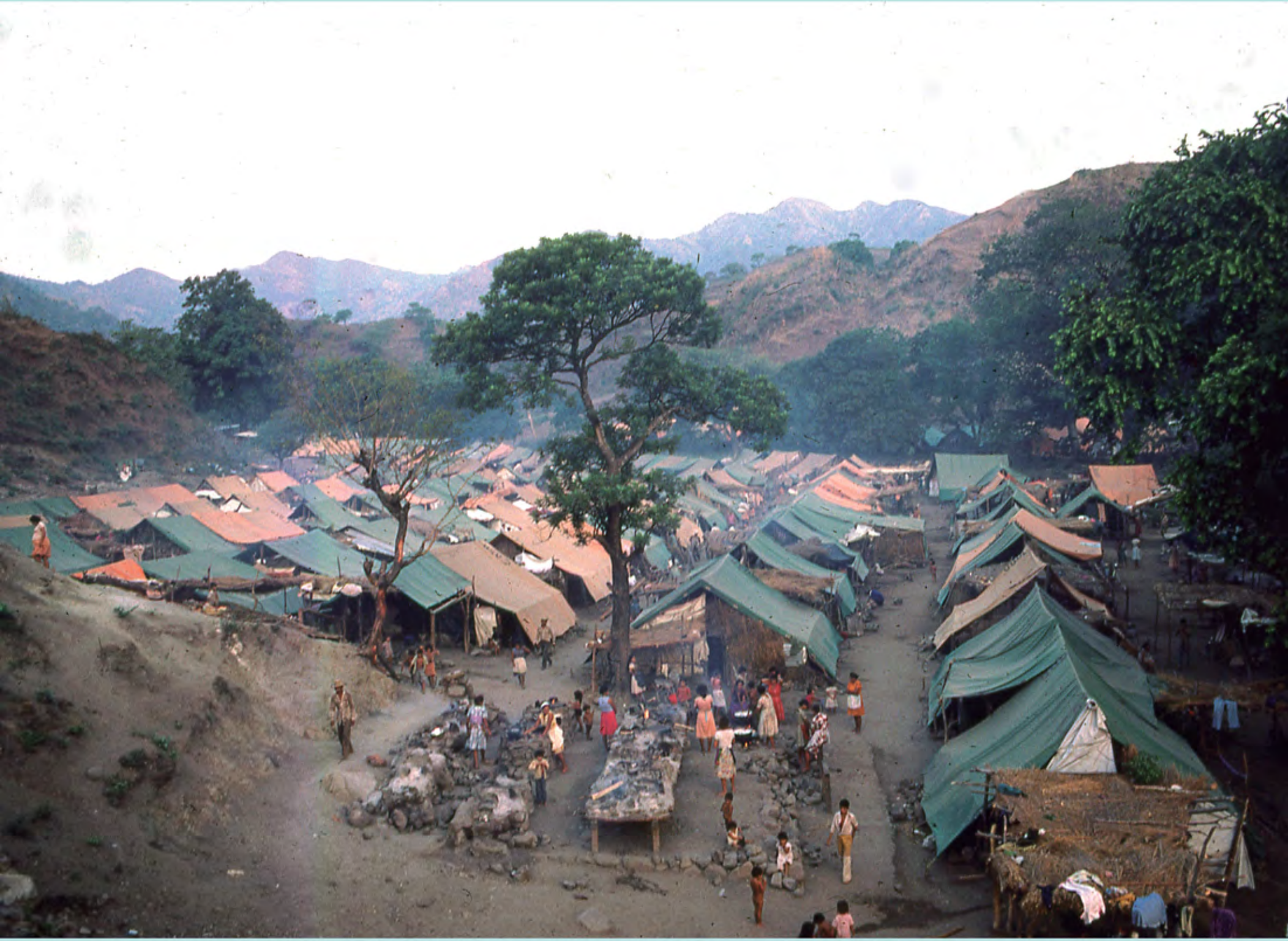
"The girls aged ten years and older were raped [by the military], so my dad fled the house with me. We fled to the hills until the army operations ceased. People fled and we went to a place called Los Guardados. In Los Guardados, we didn't have anything to eat, but good people always helped us and gave us some food. *Campesinos* were poor, so we managed with anything we got."

Cristina Ortega

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"Many people supported us. When there were [military] operations here, people near the border would find places to take refuge or take their families. They would hide our families there and protect them from Honduran soldiers. There was a man named Rufino, and they even made a song to honour him. People were so grateful because he protected many people. The first invasion of Cabañas included the Lempa River massacre. Many people died there, many were wounded, and Honduran soldiers killed many people. People reached the place called Los Hernández Valley. All of our people got there, those whom the guerrilla called 'the masses."'

María Maximina Sorto



Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

The road to the border with Honduras was not easy. The first waves of refugees were taken in by Honduran *campesinos* and *campesinas*, but eventually international organizations such as the UNHCR became involved. One of the first refugee camps was La Virtud, adjacent to the community of La Virtud and close to the border with El Salvador. It did not have the best conditions and the risk of attacks by both the Salvadoran and Honduran armies was always present. Despite the hardships of displacement, the refugees continued supporting the struggle.

LA VIRTUD
REFUGEE CAMP

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

"We went up to La Virtud, to Los Hernández. We were there. Many problems arose because the [Honduran] military attacked people in the same fashion because they didn't want us there. We were on the shore of a river, among the camps on the creek's shoreline. We drank its water, so we soon had an epidemic of illness. Around eight to twelve people died every day from diarrhea, vomiting, and fever. We were told they had poisoned the water. They withheld the food for our people, for our children. People organized to ensure food and medicine reached us. People said that epidemic began because they poisoned the waters so we truly would be 'finished' there."

María Alba Serrano

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"The refugee camps emerged in 1980 in villages close to the border. People went individually to seek refuge in those villages. Honduran people gave them shelter and, later, international institutions came to the border to deal with the refugees. People left individually, not as a group; they fled repression. For example, a couple of families would agree to go to such and such a place, and then they would leave. At the beginning, the refugee camps were settled in Mapulaca [Honduras], in the Department [province] of Lempira, but as the war intensified in 1981, all the people left for Mesa Grande. They left through the Department of Cabañas in March 1981. A huge migration took place, an exodus of many people. It is my understanding that there were around seven thousand people. Seven thousand people. There were already people in the villages of Honduras when these new people arrived. They had to stay on wastelands and on the streets; there was no choice. The United Nations was already actively involved at this point, as were religious institutions, Doctors Without Borders, and solidarity groups. They attempted to protect the area so refugees wouldn't get killed."

José Lino Hernández

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"People from Los Hernández gave us a hand. Men and women made meals for us. Everybody said: 'They are our family.'"

Group singing

"As soon as we arrived in La Virtud, we built wooden shelters — planks tied with string. Then we began to prepare milk and meals for the elderly and children."

Anonymous Woman

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"For [the Salvadoran government], the fish is the guerrilla and the water is the masses, the civilians. In the small villages, everybody gets organized — children, the elderly, women, and among them some are chosen to be trained to defend the land. They get military training to know how to use weapons, etcetera. [The Salvadoran government] thought that if they separated the guerilla from the masses, the guerilla would die fast. That was their plan. The scorched earth operations meant destroying children, animals, everything the enemy owned. It meant burning houses and everything else. This is how the situation, the refugee camps, emerged."

José Lino Hernández

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"We, people from Cabañas, have a history that we will never forget. On March 18, 1981 we experienced the biggest [military] operation. It happened in the area of Villa Victoria. On March 18, we had to leave for Honduras. First, we were in a place called La Virtud. One year later, we went to Mesa Grande [refugee camp], where we met people from Chalatenango and other places, who had arrived in other parts of Honduras. The policy was to take [the refugees] further into the country, arguing that if they were close to the border, the National Guard and government soldiers would come. They said people were safer in other places. The policy was to draw us away from El Salvador. Perhaps it is important to remember our history, all the suffering we went through on this journey."

José Lino Calle jas

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"The other thing is that, as *campesinos*, we had few relationships with other people, so we were isolated. What took us to Honduras made us meet people that we didn't know. It was an awakening, living with other people, but before that, no, there was deep shyness. So, the need to get organized emerged. There is a well-known song about that [by Víctor Jara], which goes: 'Let's tear down [barbed wire] fences, let's tear down [barbed wire] fences because the land is ours and we will conquer it.'"

Francisco García

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

The transfer of refugees from La Virtud refugee camp to Mesa Grande refugee camp was controversial and many did not want to leave. Mesa Grande was farther away from the border and moving the refugees toward the interior was a deliberate strategy to separate the refugees from the guerillas. However, it also provided some additional protection for the refugees from the Salvadoran and Honduran armies. It took several months to complete the transition, and Salvadorans who had established themselves in La Virtud had to begin again in a new camp, in a colder and harsher environment.

FORCED RELOCATION TO MESA GRANDE

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"We were in La Virtud until the beginning of 1982. We were always surrounded by the Honduran army. They searched our places. Sometimes, they would even take people away. So, they transferred us to Mesa Grande. We don't remember the date, but it was in 1982, the beginning of 1982. Once there, we started organizing with work groups, workshops with the support of international groups."

Francisco Madrid Recinos

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"We lost our relatives and everything. It was hard for us. The internationals served us very well, brought food and everything else. That's the way it was. We have much to tell because we have suffered a lot. We suffered since childhood. Let me say that I was eleven years old when I went to Honduras."

María Nelsa Martínez

"Later, we were told about the people from UNHCR who came from Mesa Grande. They began to ask families if they wanted to go back [to El Salvador] or go to a refugee camp. We said, 'yes' [to the refugee camp] because they told us we would have more food there and children wouldn't suffer, so we went there. They took us to Mesa Grande."

Cristina Ortega

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

Once in Mesa Grande, the first group of refugees worked to build sub-camps at the site. Others cooked, assisted with healthcare, and distributed clothing and utensils. After the hardships of the journey and the violent oppression in El Salvador, many people felt a sense of relief and solidarity with international aid workers, local Hondurans, and one another. On Sundays, the inhabitants of Mesa Grande gathered in large meetings where they shared information, solved problems, and organized the people.

CONSTRUCTION OF MESA GRANDE REFUGEE CAMP

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

"[Mesa Grande] was well organized. They welcomed people with food, with a dinner in a big house they called the storehouse. There were things to sleep with, blankets and such. I remember that it was well organized. They welcomed people warmly and joyfully. Some people were starving, dying of cold, lacking so many things, shoeless."

Anita Rivas

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"We held our meetings on Sunday mornings, and sometimes we had them on Saturday. They were informative meetings. People would get information about food, problems, and the organization of work and workshops such as tailoring, hammock making, and handicrafts. They also notified us about individuals or delegations who came to support us, and issues that arose [in the camp], so people would be well informed. All issues were solved there, in that space."

Mario Recinos Sánchez

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

"Mesita is the Honduran village [near the refugee camp]. Many, many [Honduran] people lived together with us. They came to work with us because they were employees of Honduran institutions that provided services in Mesa Grande, to help train people in the camps. They were agronomists working in agriculture, while others worked in education. Hondurans also benefited from this situation because they had jobs and were able to help. They collaborated with us."

Anonymous Man

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"They were one-room houses. We only had a small space and right next to it, there was another house. One family on one side and another on the other side. We had to make room for everybody. We were all sheltered, but crowded like ants."

Balmore Lorines Escobar

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

The workshops, from dressmaking to embroidery to hammock making, were an essential part of life in Mesa Grande. Refugees contributed to camp necessities and maintained strength and dignity in the face of hardship. Schools were established and many people – even adults – learned how to read and write. Although they were farther away from the border in Mesa Grande, no one could break the close bonds between the refugees and their native country of El Salvador.

WORK AND CRAFTMAKING

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

"In Mesa Grande, everything was organized. People in the camp got their food in one place. There were opportunities for children to learn how to read and write, and for adults who didn't know how to read and write as well. Adults could also learn a trade, to make hammocks."

María Alba Serrano

"When we didn't go to school, on weekends, we attended an embroidery workshop. For about two hours, they taught us how to embroider. Then we went to another workshop, to learn how to make hammocks."

Anonymous Woman

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"People would receive food. They also formed groups to distribute food. We had long lines, whole families [in line to get food]. There was also a nutrition center where meals for children and the elderly were made. They also had storehouses with rabbits. They seasoned the rabbit meat and made soups for the elderly. They prepared meals for the elderly. Later, as time passed by, we got used to it. We got used to this place."

Cristina Ortega

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"We learned a lot. People there were creative, very creative; proof of this are the many things we got involved in. We lacked resources, so we invented resources."

Otilio Ayala

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"When one reached Mesa Grande, there was an organizational structure. We had workshops in which to work, a school to attend and vegetable gardens. People were assigned to different workplaces, so we began a new way of surviving."

Francisco Madrid Recinos

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"They thought that in this refugee camp in Mesa Grande, which is many kilometres away from the border, the bond [with El Salvador] would be broken, but it wasn't. Instead we found ways to maintain the bond. Many people were interested in their country because they had lost family members. There were children who had lost their parents. Although we didn't struggle for food in the camp, the isolation was hard. There was a border and you couldn't go beyond it—people were killed there. There was a border, a fence. If you went beyond it, you got killed."

José Lino Hernández

"My dad used to tell me that if you went to school you would grow up lazy, so he didn't send me to school. [In Mesa Grande], even though I had little children, I tried to finish second grade. I took my children to school with me. I would hang a little hammock and rock it while studying, while writing. But when I was promoted to third grade, I couldn't continue because I had another baby, who was born [in the camp]. It was harder for me. I had to take care of my children, so I had no time to study. I just got that far. At least I know how to write my name. I learned a little bit. I learned it there."

Anonymous Woman

"As other people say, one has good and bad memories. The nice thing there was that we worked and lived together. Food was the same for everybody, and clothes as well. I worked in the tailoring shops making clothes. It is a joy to sew for people despite sorrow and affliction. When you work, you forget it. That's what we did, we worked and we sewed for our people."

Anonymous Woman

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"People were tired of eating corn with weevils, almost rotten. Sometimes they gave us rotten food as a way to tell us: 'go away, go.' Our *compañeros* who stayed at Mesa Grande, the last to return [to El Salvador], even had to go on strike and march for their food quota. It wasn't the same as when we got there, when everything was good and abundant."

Otilio Ayala

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

Women in Mesa Grande showed courage, strength, resilience, and kindness. They cared for everyone and for one another. They also recognized that unity and organization in Mesa Grande required discipline, so they formed a patrol called *Batallón Pacho*. The patrol enforced good behaviour and everybody respected them. Women played a vital role in decision making and in reporting the outcomes of the collective discussions. The battle was fought in many trenches. Women led the households and also led in the mountains. They led at every level.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

"There was always a steering committee to coordinate everything: the cleaning team, the youth team, the pastoral team, the women's team, and so on, a lot of groups."

Anonymous Woman

"We were well organized. There was a cooking team, who made meals for everybody. There was a dressmaking team; a cleaning team that cleaned the whole area, the refugee camp; and the team that took care of the bathrooms as well. All of that."

Anonymous Woman

"'Here comes the Batallón Pacho,' said the men. They were afraid of women because they would keep them in check."

María Nelsa Martínez

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"I clearly recall when a guerrilla girl, who was pregnant, came to the camp. She only had the clothes on her back, and she was eight months pregnant. When we saw her, our group of women said, 'Well, this guerilla girl has come to us. She is a great person, so we have to collect baby clothes and, at least, rice and cinnamon, and anything else we can give her.' We made her wait in her house saying that we would visit her. About twenty women went to visit her. When she saw us, she was really happy. We brought clothes, rice, cinnamon, sugar and other stuff to her. Although there was a storehouse where everything was distributed, this was a gift for her baby. Many of us gave her blankets and baby clothes, which we put on a table. We told her, 'this is for you. Welcome to Mesa Grande. Be good and you will live happily and peacefully here. Go through this stuff and see if you like it. It's second-hand, but you will find a use for it.' She hugged us and cried. She cried with deep emotion and said, 'I thought I wouldn't even have a diaper to wrap around my baby, and you have brought so many clothes to me.' She had a baby girl."

María Dolores Loyola

Survival depended on access to food in the refugee camp. Food was stored, protected and distributed every week according to camp rules. Preparing and cooking food was often a collective activity.

FOOD AND NUTRITION

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

"Everyone who reached [Mesa Grande] had to be part of the organizational system already in place. How did we manage to work such hard soil? Perhaps God helped us to produce tomatoes and all kinds of vegetables. We had workshops for sheet metal, tailoring, woodworking, embroidering. We had a storehouse to keep the food and other goods that the UNHCR brought to us. We had a health clinic—we helped in healthcare with the little knowledge we had. Everything was well organized. We also got firewood. Every week we got new food. Everything was distributed, including food."

Anonymous Woman

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"We cooked collectively. We called it 'collective' because people would do it as a group. We also washed in groups. We had to go early in the morning to wait in line because we had only one stone washing sink. There were different subcamps, so each had their own rules, but we all formed groups; some washed first and were done at one o'clock. We had rules for everything. At night, we also patrolled the area to watch after one another. We patrolled all night."

María Nelsa Martínez

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"The first who arrived [at the camp] welcomed us with a meal. Meals were made together. At the beginning, everybody picked up tortillas and food at the kitchen, a place that was like a storehouse."

Cristina Ortega

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"People were organized; they lived together as brothers and sisters. If there was nothing but a tortilla, many of us would eat from the same tortilla, at least a bite, but we all ate together. That was life there. We had entertainment, we lived happily, peacefully. We knew we were in danger, but we lived peacefully."

Francisco Madrid Recinos

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"We used history to help campesino people learn syllables, so people learned to read while discussing the [current social] reality. Everything came with a picture. People were very smart. They drew pictures of people picking coffee, which was the job of people here, people picking coffee, picking cotton, people with baskets. We showed these pictures in class and people engaged easily; they could hold long conversations. Our philosophy of education was to help people express their ideas, learn how to speak, and so on."

José Lino Calle jas

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

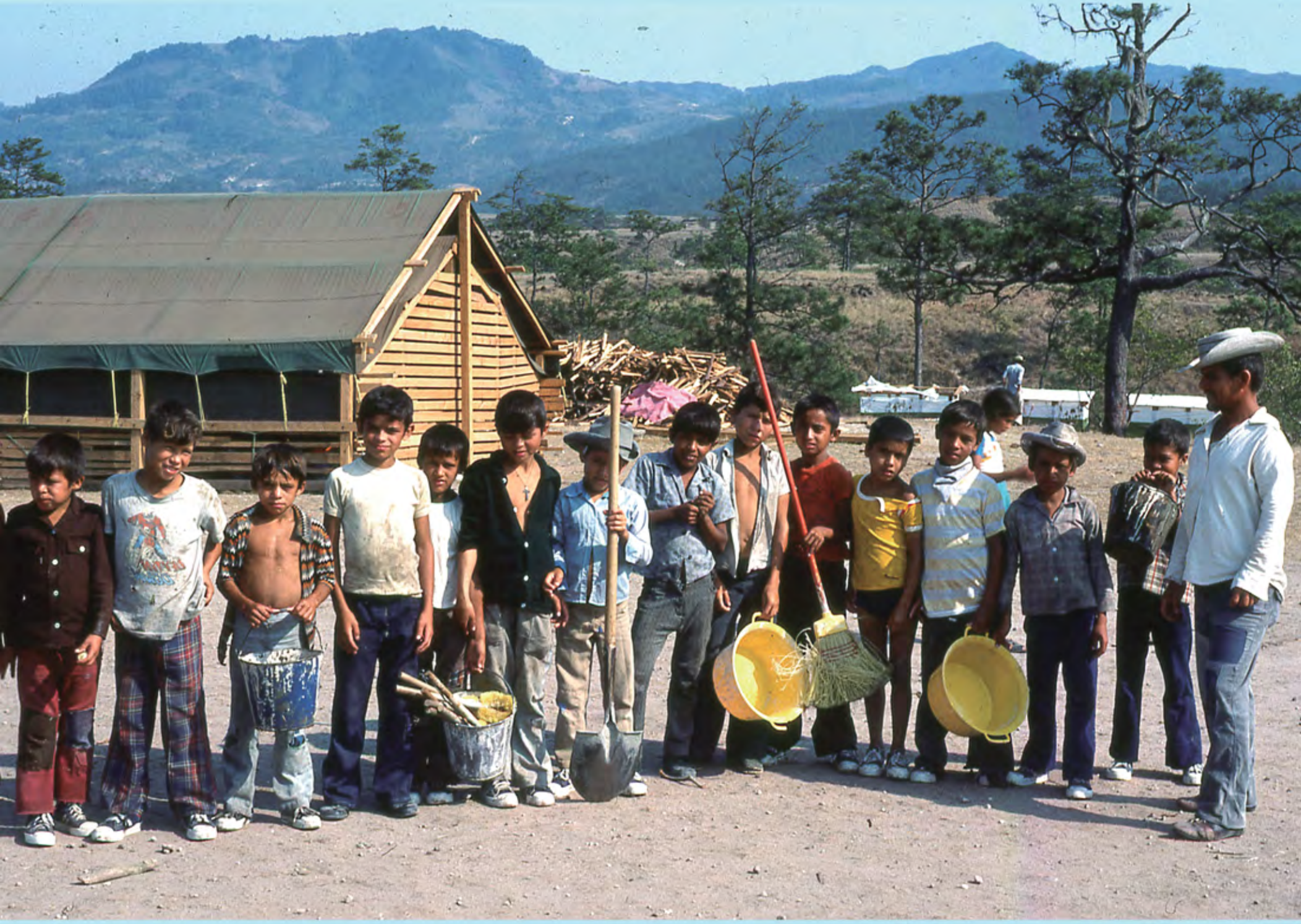
"How strange are God's ways! We endured the war for twelve years, twelve years. When we had food, we ate; when we didn't have anything, we didn't. We would go up to a week without food, but here we are alive. We didn't die."

José Martín Castellano

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

Many children spent their childhoods in Mesa Grande, and many were born there. Like their parents, the children were extremely resourceful and creative. They invented games and made their toys by hand. Children cooperated with their parents in the workshops. Some were happy despite the danger, while others were quite fearful. Children were also physically vulnerable, however, and many died of disease and starvation during the war.

THE CHILDREN OF MESA GRANDE



Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"I didn't do much, but I was busy all day. I flew kites and rode wooden bikes with wooden wheels. For us children, these bikes were great. We were happy."

Balmore Lorines Escobar

"Children created their own games. We were innovative because we needed to play and have fun. We didn't have store-bought toys. Nobody brought us toys. Rarely an international [aid worker] brought a plastic toy, which for us was a novelty, so we created our own games, our own objects for playing."

Otilio Ayala

"During the war, children didn't play freely like today; they played in fear. We, as mothers, feared we might lose our children at any moment."

Anonymous Woman

"I didn't have a childhood."

Anonymous Woman

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

"We just played and fought with other kids, went to school, went to the workshops—like embroidery or rolling string to make hammocks or fibres for cebaderas (woven bags). That was the little we could do as kids. Other than that, we just played outside because sometimes you would go home, to your mom, and there wasn't even food there."

Balmore Lorines Escobar

Courtesy of Adam Kufeld

Music was essential for maintaining morale in the face of war. In the camps, the refugees sang religious, popular, and political songs, both alone and in groups. Songwriters living in the camps, like Norberto Amaya, wrote revolutionary songs that described the horror of the army massacres and celebrated the guerrillas' efforts. Songs describing life in the camps were also common and often sung with instruments made in the camp. Music and dancing offered an emotional release from the challenges of life as a refugee, but the refugees' songs also served to document history, promote solidarity, and remember those fallen in the war.

MUSIC

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

"There was music with string instruments, guitars, violins, basses. The UNHCR brought the instruments, and sometimes people made them in the woodworking shop. They made beautiful songs; they cheered people up. There were music festivals that were very good. Some presented their songs at the festivals. The songs spoke about what we went through."

Francisco Madrid Recinos

"That was our life in the camp. Anytime we were free, we played the guitar."

José Martino Castellano

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

"You would come to Norberto Amaya with a story and ask him to write a song. If someone told him the story and how they wanted the song to sound, then he would do it."

Lucía Amaya

"For a guerrilla song, we had to make it joyful, to cheer up the guerrillas. I sang these songs only at parties, every time we had special activities. Every time there was an action, when a town was taken, then at night there was a dance, I sang the new song I had written there. It was wonderful to sing without fear, without fearing a soldier would come to kill you at night."

Norberto Amaya

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"There are many types of music: joyful music and music that makes you feel sad. Rancheras are different from cumbias. There are some songs that are beautiful. They make you feel deep in your heart what you lost in the war: my son, my daughter, my brother. The song talks about it. I don't know how to put into words how I feel when I hear these songs."

José Martino Castellano

"When you hear this music, you remember … you don't forget."

Anonymous Woman

In Mesa Grande, there was a small hospital where international health workers, such as Doctors Without Borders, saw patients and trained some members of the community. But health was also dependent on spiritual and social connections. Solidarity with family and friends was important. Caring for one another in the refugee camp was a way of preparing for the communities they would build when they returned to El Salvador.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"In the little hospital, we had doctors from Doctors Without Borders. They prepared small classes. There was no specialized prenatal care, but we did have [an introduction]. They taught us about breastfeeding, how to breastfeed, how babies are born, and so on."

Anonymous Woman

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

"There were churches. Priests came to say mass. Caritas also brought priests to say mass. They had nice services. They had parties, so people wouldn't get bored. We even danced around a small music player."

Cristina Ortega

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"We got together and it was sort of like social work. [We said], you have to behave well, you have to be free. We provided an orientation for people, for women to fight for their dignity and for our struggle. We told people that we weren't Hondurans, so we didn't have to stay in Honduras, but would return to our country. We formed small groups of women, which as a way of organizing, helped us to reincorporate into society once we were back in our country. We wanted to have a good experience there, a good memory to bring back to our country."

María Dolores Loyola

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

"The other experience was that we learned to live in a group, to know each other, to know other people, to make friends with people from other places. We lived together, and we returned together. People from Chalate [Chalatenango], Cabañas, Cuscatlán came in the first return. We all met there. It was good to live together, united. It helped a lot. Without unity, the struggle of our country won't bring any results. For that reason, what you see is a person, a political group or a people who want to be part of a movement can do nothing if alone. People … so they live in solidarity. That's the best. It is not only about knowing others, but becoming and feeling like a new family, loving them."

Francisco García

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

Mesa Grande was farther from the border than La Virtud, but never too far. Many people in the camp maintained strong ties with the guerillas who were fighting in the mountains of El Salvador, some of whom were the sons and daughters of refugees. The camp became an important source of supplies for those who remained in El Salvador, and space of recruitment for the guerrilla forces.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"We used to come to El Salvador to bring medication and food to those who were here and needed them. Medication, food, clothes. There were many people in El Salvador who stayed and needed these things. Children, adults, and the elderly."

María Nelsa Martínez

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"The FMLN emerged and went to the mountains to defend the children of those living in the camps in Mesa Grande and other refugee sites. They stayed behind to defend these people. That is why people began to return in 1987, so they could also support the [guerrilla] army that was fighting here for all the Salvadoran people. Mesa Grande was a refugee camp, but it was also, in practical terms, a logistics station, an incubator for the FMLN because many people came from there. Even if they knew that the road was dangerous, they still came [to El Salvador]. Many people traveled here."

Francisco Madrid Recinos

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

Many people in Mesa Grande had close ties to the guerillas. It was sometimes hard for the refugees to be away from their country, separated from the struggle for their native land. As international aid began to decline in the camp, the refugees began advocating for their return home.

BEARING THE BURDEN

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"There were tailoring, mechanics, woodwork, and clothing shops. There was also a bakery, and a shop to make hammocks. We made hammocks, handicrafts, embroidery pieces, countless things. All people were organized there. We worked collectively in farming as well. We lived a different life because we were busy with work, but at the same time, we also lived surrounded by soldiers. We always felt the pressure of the military, and that was always a worry. We knew that the war was hard in El Salvador: many family members and friends stayed here. We all lived thinking of the people of our country. There were also a lot of people fighting here, so around 1987 people began organizing to return."

Francisco Madrid Recinos

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"Why did we want to return? We had limited food [in the camp], and the Honduran army took away some people from the camp to kill them. We couldn't stay any longer because food was limited for refugees. People decided to leave, to go back to their places to work and produce their own food, and no longer depend on the UNHCR and other international solidarity, but rather work to produce their own food."

Anonymous Man

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

When we talk about our *compañeros* in struggle, it is like talking about a brother or sister. We lived together with many people, so we saw each other as brothers and sisters. When someone died or was wounded, it was very hard; we shared the grief. […] We finally took courage and bridged the gap. It wasn't easy to say, 'Let's go.' It was very hard to leave Honduras because we were protected there. Putting our lives in danger was hard. For the other returns, the gap was already bridged; the hardest was the first return."

Francisco García

October 10, 1987 was the first return. After years of internment in the camp, Mesa Grande began to feel like a "jail without walls" because of the repression from the Salvadoran and the Honduran armies. Organizing the return to El Salvador was a new struggle and a difficult path. The war was not over yet, but the refugees were determined to return and repopulate their communities.

PREPARING FOR THE RETURN AND REPOPULATION

Courtesy of Linda Dale

"We were in the camps, but we felt like prisoners. We couldn't go beyond the fence because the Honduran soldiers were watching the area. We had borders. Although they went through a lot of hardship, people enjoyed many benefits. They lived relatively well. It wasn't excellent, but they had enough to live on. We were repressed; our people were repressed by the Salvadoran government on the one hand and by the Honduran government on the other."

Janira Ayes

"'Let's go back to our country. This is a prison without walls'—that was how one felt. The hardest part was that we missed our family."

María Dolores Loyola

"The repopulation didn't mean that we would stay in one place or different places, but rather it meant a commitment to keep going, to help others, to be part of the fight in our country. There were *compañeros* on the front lines of our fight and we were committed to supporting them. We returned on October 10, 1987. We all decided during a meeting to organize the return. They called the meeting to reach a decision together and to persuade people to return and repopulate this place."

Mario Recinos Sánchez

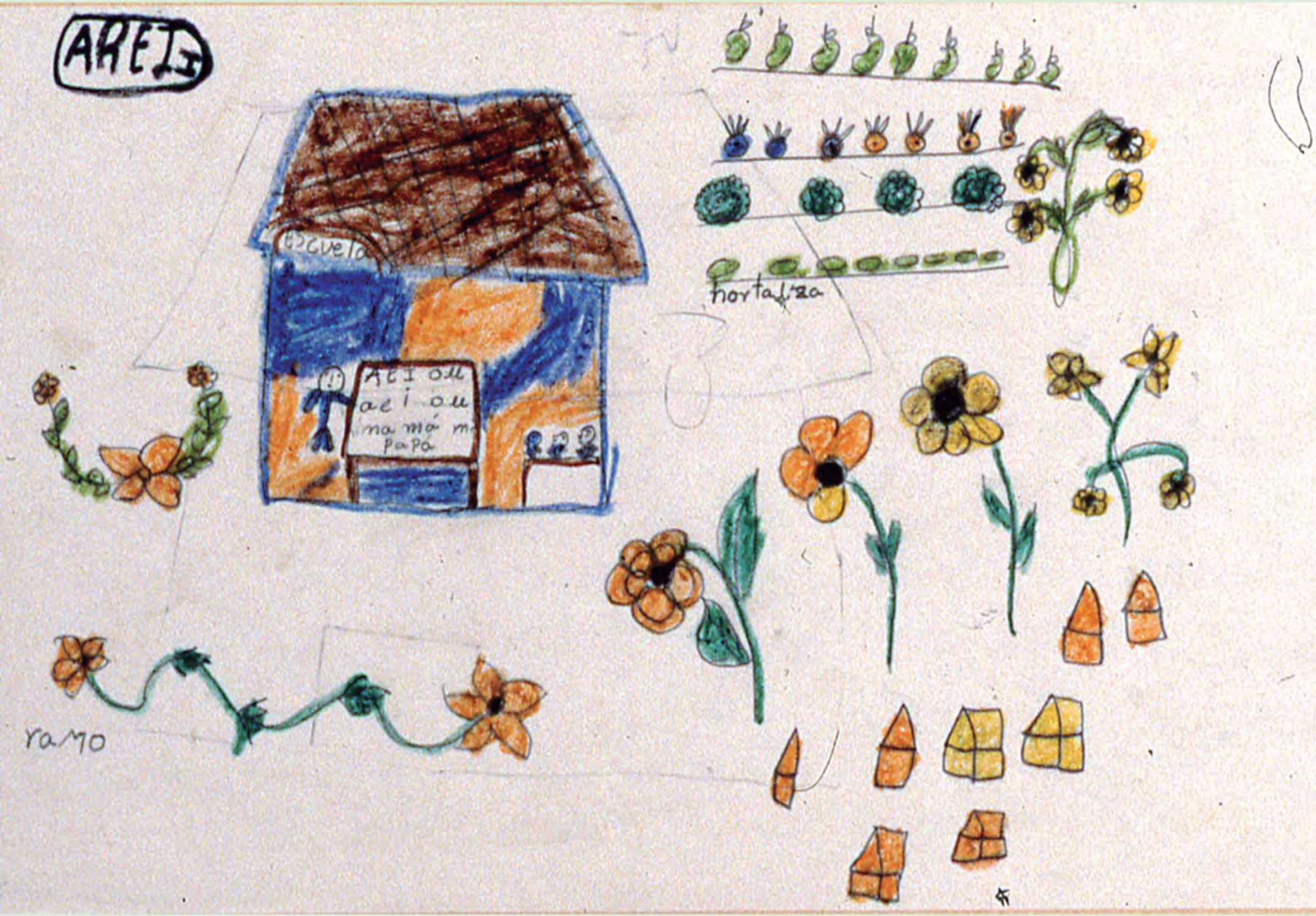
"When we could return to our country, people felt motivated because there was a need. Most of us had left our children in the [FMLN] revolutionary army, so we were concerned about seeing them again. That motivated people. Nobody threatened people saying, 'You have to go with us.' No. It was voluntary."

Anonymous Man

Courtesy of Oxfam Canada

"It is true that we were refugees, but it was hard. We had to come back and forth to El Salvador, and the road was so dangerous that many died. Many thousands of people traveled back and forth; others stayed there to work with [the guerrillas]. They stayed in the mountains so we could come back and forth. That road was not good; it was awful and dangerous. So many decided to stay instead of going back and forth. So many decided: 'Why come and go all the time, it might be better to go and not return.' A decision was reached so when they said, 'let's go,' we said, 'let's go, it'll be better there rather than coming and going.' That's how we returned."

Francisco Madrid Recinos



Courtesy of Linda Dale

"Communities must have historical memory. It must not be lost so our youth and children know how hard it was to get here. I think part of the reason children don't want to cooperate is because they don't know the sacrifice our parents made to get here, all they had to go through, all their struggle to move us forward, all their sacrifice so that we would survive the war. Adults should tell their grandchildren the history of how we lived in Honduras, in El Salvador, and how we are back here and we keep working. We know because our parents told us their story, what it was like, but we also need to share it with our children, to tell them that organization is essential, not only to us individually, but also to help others. In our community, we should do this. We shouldn't be discouraged by criticism but keep pursuing what we want, and with the people we love, to benefit the whole community."

Anita Rivas

Courtesy of Meyer Brownstone

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our team is grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for providing the primary funding for this pilot project through an Insight Development Grant. We also acknowledge generous research funding from internal grant programs at Western University and Montana State University, which supported the research and development of this project. SalvAide (Canada) and CRIPDES (The Association for the Development of El Salvador) both provided in-kind support in Canada and El Salvador. Our project would not have been possible without the collaboration and gracious support of the Muncipality of Suchitoto, Mayor Pedrina Rivera, the community of Milingo, and the communities of Las Américas, Papaturro, Sitio Cenicero, Zacamil 1 and 2, Pepeshtenango, Los Henríquez, and Copapayo. We are also grateful to the Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen and its director, Carlos "Santiago" Henríquez, for their collaboration in the publication and distribution of this photobook. Finally, we would like to thank the following individuals and organizations for their assistance and support: Oxfam Canada, Archives and Special Collections at Carleton University, Marc Allain, Susan Johnson, Julie Delahanty, Linda Dale, Brian Murphy, Nancy Campbell, Sharon Henderson, Steve Cagan, Adam Kufeld, Lloyd Keane, Peter Conrad, Pedro Cabezas, Centro Arte para la Paz, Comedor Pájaro Flor, Radio Nueva Amanecer, Los Gavilanes de Suchitoto, Asociación Sumpul, Miriam Ayala, Bernardo Belloso, Norberto "Don Tito" Amaya and his family, Juan Bello and Triana Media, Dr. Bernie Hammond, Hotelito Casa Antigua, Medardo González, Luis Hernández, Josué Claudio Hernández and Quality Transport, Dr. Jacquie Burkell, Dr. John Capone, Karen Kueneman, Sharon Waters, Tom Gabriel, Dr. David Heap, Bruce Cockburn, and all of our families.

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

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Museo de la
Palabra y la Imagen

The seeds for this book project were planted nine years ago during a chance meeting in a café in Toronto between Dr. Meyer Brownstone, the former Chair of Oxfam Canada, and Reynaldo Hernández, a Salvadoran who migrated to Canada as a refugee in 1991. In 1980, the Hernández family – like many Salvadoran *campesinos* and *campesinas* – fled to the refugee camps in Honduras to escape the repression and violence of the Salvadoran Armed Forces. Dr. Brownstone often visited the camps, where he took many pictures of the daily life of the refugees. In 2017, these photos became the inspiration for a photo exhibition and a series of historical memory workshops with repopulated communities in the municipality of Suchitoto, which were organized in collaboration with Western University, Montana State University, and SalvAide Canada.