

Interview with Bertha Oliva: Committee of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras

1/26/2019 La Tribuna



Bertha Oliva Guifarro was born on March 7, 1956 in the community of Toro Muerto, San Estaban, Olancho. She is the daughter of Jose Transito Oliva and Agripina Guifarro, who had sixteen children. For 40 years she has dedicated her life to the defense and promotion of human rights with COFADEH, an NGO that she helped to found together with other families following the forced disappearance of her husband Tomas Nativi on June 11, 1981.

****“Open the door, maybe they will leave you alive and you can continue the struggle” Nativi told her when the hooded men arrived.***

The hooded men were none other than members of the feared death squads of the decade of the 80s. They entered the house and after killing her friend Fidel Martínez, they took her husband Tomás Nativí. Bertha was pregnant. They left her tied up and blindfolded. The episode marked her life forever and opened the darkest chapter in the political history of Honduras. Much of what happened next is public knowledge, but there are things that no one has known and which Berta Oliva now shares, including the identity of the captors of her husband and martyr of love.

Are the Olivas of Olancho the same as those in the south?

No. I am from San Esteban, daughter of Tránsito Oliva and Agripina Guifarro, who was the first teacher in the village.

How many brothers and sisters?

I am the fifth of my parents 16 children. Eight women and seven men. When my mother married, she left teaching to raise us.

Did you lack for anything?

No, we had all that was needed, most importantly the love of both of them. I grew up in the midst of horses, streams and the beauty of life in the campo. Since there were so many of us children, my father made a house for a professor to come and give us class. Then other neighbors joined.

How did you come to leave San Esteban?

The Toro Muerto community only had fourth grade. My father got a house in the colonia El Hogar in Tegucigalpa and my older sister was in charge of us.

Where did you study?

I studied commerce in El Central, but the last year I graduated from Luis Andrés Zúñiga. Then I enrolled to study journalism in the UNAH, but then I got married and this changed my life forever.

Married to Tomás Nativí?

Yes. It was a clandestine wedding. Note even my parents or brother and sisters knew about it.

It was too dangerous to reveal the identity of your husband?

Yes, because of the danger.

Why did you decide to marry him, knowing that he was a danger?

For me he was not a danger. For him to show me the path of justice was not a danger.

Where did you meet him?

We were neighbors en el Hogar. Tomás was a son of Honduras and if the country were in different circumstances, he would be a contemporary hero for his commitment to the cause of social justice.

When did your parents find out?

It was very hard because they found out the same day that they disappeared him, on June 11, 1981. It was the National Day of the Student. That day, I had decided to tell my family about our relationship.

Did you have children?

I was pregnant with my son Tomás Alberto but I was still living in my parents' house in El Hogar. That is how my parents found out, because Tomás was taken from there.

Do you remember what happened?

It was a trap. We are in the house with Fidel Martínez, and a woman. I am convinced that she betrayed Tomás and Fidel.

They gave away their location?

No. It was a plan. Tomás was living clandestinely and so was Fidel. They were told that something was urgent and they needed to meet at my house.

Is the informant still alive?

For mental health reasons, I have lost track of her. I don't know if she is alive or dead.

But you knew who it was?

Yes, it was the woman who was with us that night. She was part of the death squads plan under direction of the armed forces.

Did you see his captors?

Yes, they came in with hoods, not the way they do today. They used white hoods.

Did they mistreat you?

Well, when I pulled the hood off of one of them, they hit me. When I regained consciousness, my hands and feet were bound. I was blindfolded and gaged.

They took Fidel and the woman?

No, not her. They killed Fidel then and there. I am sure of it because I heard the shots with a silencer, his scream, the quantity of blood that was left and I could see his body as they carried him out. I don't think he was alive.

Tomás was alive?

They took Tomás alive, but I have never seen him again.

At what time?

At 3:21 in the morning. I remember it well.

Did they break into the house?

No, they didn't even use anything, they just opened the door. It should have been double bolted and with chains. The woman opened the door for them.

What did you do next?

It was not easy. The house was surrounded by soldiers dressed in civilian clothes, helicopters were flying over the house.

Who came to your house?

His compañeros, a nephew of his who had been in the military and then suffered reprisals for showing up and the journalists including Noé Leiva, who works for the newspaper El Tiempo.

Where did they dump the body of Tomás?

I don't know. People have come to tell me that that it was in this or that place. I have believed that in some of the places they may have dumped his body but I don't want to be misled.

Nearly 38 years later do you still hope to find the remains of Tomás?

Of course, this is my hope. I need to find truth. I need to find the remains of Tomás. I need to find an end to my mourning.

What happened with the rest of your life?

As of that day, June 11, 1981 my life changed. I made decisions based on the last words that Tomás spoke to me after the shots: Open the door, maybe they will let you live and you can continue the struggle.

Did you ever consider stopping?

I had two options: I could stay full of terror or I could take up his liberating legacy and I opted for the second.

How did it start?

I met with women who were crying for the same reason: Mothers, sisters, children whose family members had been disappeared.

Are you happy?

Absolutely and I say this because at my age, I have committed no crime, on the contrary I have contributed so that there will be no more disappeared.

On the emotional level, did you remain in love with Nativí or did you fall in love again?

Well, that is an easy question but it is not an easy answer. Tomás is someone who I treasure because he showed me the path of liberation. He is my idol.

Now that so many years have passed can you say who was the woman informant?

It is not worth it. May she drown in her sin and her crime. If the investigative system functioned, she would be in prison and the structure of terror and hate that reigned in the country to disappear people.

How did Cofadeh come to be?

I am part of the 12 founding families, led by Zenaida Velásquez, sister of Manfredo Velásquez, one of the disappeared, and doña Liduvina Hernández, president for life of Cofadeh.

Why did you never give up the last name of Nativí?

Because of my political formation. If they hadn't disappeared Tomás I never would have changed my name, and since Nativí carried more weight, it has accompanied me and I can have it in my memory.

Did you remake your emotional life?

I reoriented my life. I was a young woman and another man came into my life, equal or similar to Tomás, who was Adán Palacios Iriachi.

They had the same ideals?

Adán was not a revolutionary but he was democratic, a social thinker, a worker for democracy. A man whose hands were clean, like Tomás.

Do you miss them both?

Very much. They were my compañeros, they helped me to value life in the fullest dimension of the word and to be brave and strong. And the best of all is that each of them left me a treasure: My son Tomás Alberto and my daughter, Berta Marcela.

The report by Leo Valladares says that there were 184 disappeared, is that the same count as Cofadeh?

There were over 500 disappeared, but the families went silent because of the terror that the state imposed on them. Over 100 people were disappeared just in the column of Father Guadalupe Carney.

How were people disappeared?

Once they were captured, they were tortured until death to extract information. Others were dropped out of helicopters into the jungle or the ocea, even into lagoons with crocodiles.

Did they want to kill you?

They did everything to me. Killing is not just physical, you can also be killed morally, with media wars. I believe I am alive because the ancestors protected me. It is a miracle that they left me alive the day they kidnapped Tomás. Right here in this office they have wanted to kill me.

What is the legacy of Cofadeh?

We have built historic memory. We have promoted important processes like the struggle to protect the environment in Olancho; we have created spaces for freedom of expression like C-Libre; promoted legislation in Congress like the law for Communicators and Justice Operators; we made history in the Inter American Court of Human Rights by being the first organization to win a conviction against the State for forced disappearances.

Do you believe that there are death squads?

They remain in immunity. No one went to prison because forced disappearance did not exist as a crime in the penal code.

Is it that you are paranoid?

No, no, no, I am not paranoid because I am not afraid of death.

After the Leo Valladares report there was talk of the stain of the disappeared and of a new slate?

Cofadeh has declared that there is no forgetting nor pardon because those who are responsible are still here, holding positions, giving speeches on security. The worst thing is that the justice system continues to permit them to continue to offend the victims and their families.

You don't think these are different times in terms of human rights?

Nothing has changed in terms of human rights when those who are responsible for the disappearances have no fear of ever facing justice for their crimes or of manipulating their crimes. Only then will Honduras change.

Critics of Cofadeh say that that it only exists to receive funds because there are no disappeared.

How do you respond?

There are no disappeared? Right now I have three victims in my office. I feel that we have failed because we worked so that there would never be forced disappearance in the homes of the Honduran people and now there are more because there was never any sanction of anyone, no one was ever held accountable. The criminal structures continue. But I will tell you one thing; I am not tired.

Will you retire?

No way and it's not because I am getting dollars for this as some say. I have no ambition for money. The disappeared give me strength. They can not break us.

How did the politicians treat you when you brought these issues forward?

I met with some and debated with others. I had to get to know them all and to know which are dirty and which are not. I know how they operate and how far I can go. I don't engage them to challenge them, rather to change things.

Is your struggle ideological?

We have never changed our objectives, but in terms of human rights, it does not matter who it is, my interest is to help them.

Have the Presidents treated you well?

I have met with them all except Callejas because he was one of the principle actors in AHPRO.

Since "Pepe" Lobo and "Mel" Zelaya are from Olancho **Who do you know best?**

I have met the family of "Mel" Zelaya, but there is no relationship. I had more proximity to "Pepe" Lobo because he was a professor at the Fraternidad school where I studied.

Once they took power, **who did you have a better relationship with?**

With "Mel" Zelaya, because there were several members of his cabinet who we have known for a long time through the work for human rights, like Milton Jiménez, Enrique Flores Lanza and Edmundo Orellana, to mention a few.

Are you a member of a political party?

No. I vote because it is a right and responsibility as a citizen. I vote for people not for parties.

How are the rights of Honduran women today?

So much needs to be done to stop the current tragedy: there is social exclusion and countless numbers of women are murdered.

For making profiles of Cofadeh, **did you ever speak with Discua Elvir, Hung Pacheco and Billy Joya?**

You are cruel. I never spoke with Hung Pacheco. I spoke to Discua Elvir in the Inter American Court when he admitted responsibility for the death of Juan Humberto Sánchez.

And Billy Joya?

I have never spoken with the death squad member Billy Joya and I don't want to.

http://www.latribuna.hn/2019/01/26/berta-oliva-coordinadora-del-cofadeh/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook

**Translated by the Friendship Office*