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Book review

The Strange Case of Sister Dianna

The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth
By DIANNA ORTIZ with PATRICIA DAVIS
(New York: Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2002)

On 2 November 1989, an American nun named Darlene Chmielewski telephoned the US embassy in Guatemala City to report that a thirty-one-year-old novice in her charge had just disappeared. Sister Dianna Ortiz was staying with Chmielewski at a retreat center in Antigua, a peaceful town of colonial churches and villas at the foot of an immense, dormant volcano. Ortiz had been missing for just two hours, but there was a reason her companion called the embassy so quickly. For reasons no one understood, she had been receiving death threats. Less than 24 hours after she vanished, around nine o'clock the next morning, the small and slender woman reappeared at a travel agency in downtown Guatemala City. She was obviously in a state of shock. The left side of her face was badly bruised and her back proved to be dotted with second-degree burns, 111 of them, according to a physician, of a kind that could be made by a cigarette.

Dianna Ortiz was not an obvious target for a death squad. Her parents were from Mexico but she was still learning Spanish. For most of her two years in Guatemala, she had been working with children in the Mayan Indian town of San Miguel Acatán. San Miguel had suffered from army reprisals against a guerrilla movement in the early 1980s; but so had many other indigenous towns: the guerrillas had gone away and army abuses had diminished. If anyone was to run afoul of the Guatemalan army, the two sisters who supervised Ortiz were more likely candidates. Yet it was she who began receiving threatening notes in early 1989, such as 'you are going to die in this country' and 'do not walk alone, someone wants to rape you.'

Anonymous death threats are a genre in Guatemala. Some come from personal enemies, for reasons that have little to do with the protracted (1954–1996) civil war between army-dominated governments and a disenfranchized Marxist opposition. But threats are also a trademark of the most violent elements in the government security forces, often in army intelligence, who over the years kidnapped and murdered thousands of people, many on the flimsiest evidence of a connection to the guerrillas. That Ortiz was a nun was significant because the army blamed Catholic clergy for spreading the insurgency to indigenous regions. No priests or nuns had been killed since 1983 but threats were still common, and attacks were often directed against coworkers of the intended target. Thus two coworkers of Bishop Julio Cabrera died in street hits in the year-and-half following Ortiz' abduction. A Marist brother was killed in 1991 and a parish priest three years later.

Even attacks on 'little people' performed a function, US Ambassador Thomas Stroock explained:

> That the victims are generally unknown in wider society means a more muted reaction both locally and abroad; it makes the question 'why?' more difficult to answer and many nonpolitical explanations, e.g., common crime, can plausibly be put forward to explain the victimization of a relatively anonymous person. While the victims are not figures of wide renown, they are well known within the small groups comprising the left. The bolt-from-the-blue strike against one of their members causes a ripple of terror . . . forcing many members into hiding or exile or at least into abandoning whatever immediate project the group had.

When Sister Dianna showed up at the travel agency, it was in the hope of leaving Guatemala quickly. Sister Darlene and the Maryknoll Fathers, an American missionary order, took charge of her and turned away the Guatemalan police. On the grounds that Ortiz was in no condition to answer questions, they also shielded her from the US embassy officials who mobilized to help. Two days later, Darlene Chmielewski and another sister flew Dianna back to the Ursuline mother house in Kentucky. It was only in the United States that her story emerged, and at first only through her guardians. Unknown men in civilian dress – the usual guise of a Guatemalan death squad – had kidnapped her from the retreat's garden. They took her to a clandestine prison in Guatemala

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City where they demanded that she identify people in photographs, burned and raped her. One of the three torturers wore a policeman's uniform. Eventually they were joined by a fourth man, to whom the others referred as their *jefe* Alejandro. Suddenly Alejandro said 'Shit!' in perfect unaccented English, then switched to heavily accented Spanish to add 'Idiots, this is a North American. Leave her alone. She's all over the television news.' It was Alejandro who removed Dianna's blindfold, helped her dress and put her into a jeep, with the explanation that he was taking her to the US embassy where a friend could help her leave Guatemala. Five minutes into the ride, as the car stopped for a traffic light, Dianna jumped out and escaped.

So this was why Sister Dianna's colleagues suddenly spurned the US embassy's help. If her description of Alejandro was accurate, one of the torturers sounded like a fellow American, and he said he had a connection to the US embassy. Ambassador Thomas Stroock was suddenly in a very awkward position. Stroock was a Wyoming oilman, not a foreign service officer, who had served in President George H. Bush's 1988 election campaign. To the surprise of many, he became very concerned about human rights violations, including numerous army-style abductions for which the army denied responsibility. In May 1990 army officers ordered the murder of an ex-Peace Corps volunteer and resort owner named Michael Devine. Stroock made the dead American a test case. Five enlisted men were convicted, then an army captain. Unfortunately, the captain soon escaped, higher-ups were never indicted, and two relatives of a key witness were murdered. In response, the Bush administration suspended military aid. But for the claim that his embassy was connected to a torturer, Stroock had no patience. 'I find the insinuation that US Government personnel in Guatemala are involved in any kind of human rights violations against anyone to be insulting, absurd and ridiculous,' he wrote Sister Dianna's lawyer. 'This charge constitutes a scurrilous smear on the good names of the fine Americans who serve their country in this mission.'

Stroock had no doubt that Ortiz had been tortured. He also knew that the army's kidnapping squads were capable of such behavior. But he and the embassy were offended by the priests and nuns who prevented them from interviewing Ortiz while telling US congressmen that the embassy was involved in her torture. If her caretakers found a dermatologist to treat the burns on her back, why didn't they ask a physician to treat her for the painful consequences of being gang-raped? Sister Dianna's guardians also refused to question her about what she had seen on her car ride with Alejandro even though, according to their declarations to the press, she had heard the screams of at least two other torture victims, who with luck could have been traced and rescued. That she was severely traumatized, and not being very communicative even with her colleagues, could explain both these lapses, but not an odd recurring detail in her story. It is because Alejandro knows of her disappearance from television news that he realizes that his prisoner is an American nun. After she escapes from Alejandro's car, an indigenous woman gives her shelter after recognizing her, also presumably from TV. It is true that the Guatemalan archbishop had given a press conference on her disappearance the previous afternoon, so radio and television could have reported it that evening. But the archbishop did not have a photograph of her at the press conference.

The Guatemalan interior minister Carlos Morales dismissed her story as a 'self-kidnapping' – yet another attempt to discredit the country's armed forces with a false accusation. Another army general, defense minister Alejandro Gramajo, said that Ortiz had sneaked away from the Antigua retreat for a lesbian love affair. No evidence about Sister Dianna's sex life ever emerged, but such remarks made her an object of ridicule on the Guatemalan right. They also bolstered her credibility in the Catholic Church and the left. She became one of a series of army victims, including disappeared-persons activist Nineth Montenegro and 1992 Nobel peace laureate Rigoberta Menchú, who succeeded in publicizing their cases and became leaders of the Guatemalan human rights movement, even as they were ridiculed as charlatans by the army and its defenders.

Back in the United States, unfortunately, Ortiz did not recover from her ordeal. Aside from not remembering her family and colleagues, she was disassociational and suicidal, to the point that the Ursulines committed her to a Catholic psychiatric hospital. Unfortunately, Our Lady of Peace and good Dr Snodgrass only reminded her of her torturers, as did anyone who grilled her about her story. Her ties to the Ursulines snapped and she was obsessed by heretofore-unreported memories of being thrown into a pit full of bodies and rats. She now also remembered being put in a room with a tortured woman under a sheet who told her to have courage, and who the policeman then forced her to stab with a machete. She also

remembered being videotaped as she was forced to stab the woman, a videotape that Alejandro indicated would be released if she were to tell her story, so that everyone would know she was a murderer.

Sister Dianna was convinced that she had been tortured at the Old Polytechnic School, a faux-medieval castle that is one of Guatemala City's most distinctive landmarks. It has long figured in human rights reports because it is an army installation. When she identified the Polytechnic as the torture site, the army was probably all too happy to cooperate with a search warrant for two reasons. First, Ortiz was certain she had been tortured in a basement but no one has ever confirmed the existence of a subterranean Polytechnic. Second, Ortiz said that the pit of bodies into which she had been thrown was in an open courtyard, but the Polytechnic is near the flight path of the national airport two kilometers to the south, which would make a pit easy to detect. The Polytechnic is also visited by military and civilian personnel who do not belong to the army's intelligence branch and who could not be trusted to keep quiet about an atrocity. During a fruitless judicial search of the Polytechnic in January 1994, Sister Dianna was overcome by her memories and fled.

By this point, she was all too easy to dismiss in Guatemala. But in the United States, journalists did not think that the limitations of her case were significant and a federal judge in Boston ordered ex-defense minister Gramajo to pay $47.5 million to Ortiz and nine other victims of the army under his command. Her case also impressed the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which forwarded it to the Inter-American Court. But what really bolstered Sister Dianna's credibility was the case of another American. Jennifer Harbury was a Harvard-trained immigration lawyer who, in the course of solidarity activism for the Guatemalan guerrillas, met and married a *comandante*. Only months later, in March 1992, Comandante Everardo, also known as Efraín Bámaca, walked into an army ambush. The army said he died of wounds, but Harbury had evidence that he was being held secretly and tortured for information. Her campaign to find her husband eventually led to leaks from the Clinton administration and a scandal for the CIA, which had continued to pay informants in the Guatemalan officer corps even after Washington cut off military aid. One officer remained on the CIA payroll after becoming involved in the murder of Michael Devine as well as Harbury's husband. A generous severance payment of $44 000 in 1992 looked suspiciously like hush money. When Ambassador Stroock asked the CIA station chief if any of his assets were involved in the Devine and Bámaca cases, the station chief lied and said 'no.'

Thanks to the impetus provided by Harbury and the CIA scandal, Ortiz and her supporters mounted a vigil in front of the White House. They met with Hillary Clinton and obtained an official investigation, but the Justice Department quickly focused on Sister Dianna's credibility rather than on who might have tortured her. Once investigators learned that her return from Guatemala had been followed by an abortion – a fact she had withheld from her many right-to-life supporters – she refused to grant access to her medical records. The official conclusion was that she had been 'subjected to horrific abuse' but that 'US intelligence reports provide little insight into the details.' Ortiz decided against pursuing the case with the Inter-American Court because it would have required submitting to interrogation by Guatemalan investigators. Instead, she formed the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC), which occupies her to this day, and awaits documents under the Freedom of Information Act.

Because of the problems with Sister Dianna's story, this is a subject I have long avoided. The accusation against the US embassy and the embassy's brusque denials led to a mutual credibility meltdown, and her unfolding account of what happened has always bifurcated her audience into sceptics and believers. The only reason I am writing about Ortiz' case now is that, with the help of the film-maker Patricia Davis, she has published her own account. I was not expecting *The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth* to be very convincing. To my surprise, I now believe Sister Dianna. No one would publish so much embarrassing information about herself – interviews which end with her running out of the room, psychiatric committals, suicide attempts, secrecy and hypervigilance that drive away her closest supporters – unless she was sincere. Every chapter seems to end with Ortiz feeling that she has betrayed someone – her colleagues, God, or Guatemalans she could have protected from the torturers if she had been stronger. If there is an argument against publishing this book, it is that it shows torturers that what they do works.

The reason for being confident that Ortiz was tortured is not that all the details of her story can be corroborated. Instead, it is all those cigarette burns on her back. But her book also suggests that her story was never robust enough to become a test case. That a victim's story does

not come out in a way that investigators can pursue does not mean that the victim is fake; it means that the case will never be solved or prosecuted. Just in terms of when Ortiz provided information to investigators, she never did so in a timely manner because protecting herself from further trauma always took precedence. But the reason Ortiz found it so hard to cooperate with Guatemalan and US authorities is an unavoidable conundrum for many torture survivors. As a matter of law, before appealing to an international body, they must first seek justice from the same government that tortured them. Ortiz was supposed to believe that the Guatemalan justice system has the capacity to investigate and punish members of the Guatemalan security forces. She was also supposed to believe that the US government had the will to investigate its own clandestine networks.

That neither could do so in a convincing manner is the theme of *The Blindfold's Eyes*. She feels particularly betrayed by Ambassador Thomas Stroock, whose job required him to be both sympathetic and sceptical. Torture is inherently a polarizing phenomenon. It is a subject about which even conscientious, knowlegeable people do not want to spend much time thinking, because the very idea destabilizes our wish to trust duly constituted authorities. Because torture is now usually hidden and denied, accusations raise the question of who to believe – a person who could be imagining part of her story or a government that we would prefer to trust.

Why an American would be supervising a Guatemalan death squad is beyond me. I do not believe the Guatemalan security forces require instruction by American agents to violate human rights. In Freedom of Information Act releases, Sister Dianna's legal team found a CIA draft cable reporting a source's belief that she was kidnapped by the S-2 of military zone 302 headquartered in Chimaltenango. From a photograph and other sources she has decided that 'Alejandro' could be a CIA officer named Randy Capister. She has also tentatively identified another of her torturers as a Guatemalan navy officer named Guillermo Fuentes Aragón.

Unfortunately, the Ortiz case forces us to choose between benign and malign interpretations of the relationship between the US and the Guatemalan security forces. According to the US government, national interests justify relationships with criminals who are valuable sources of information, just as the FBI has informants in an organization such as the Ku Klux Klan. But the analogy falls short because the US government is subverting the Ku Klux Klan in a way that it is not subverting the Guatemalan army. 'The CIA's relationship with the Guatemalan security forces would be more analogous to the FBI paying Ku Klux Klan members . . . for information about blacks who were organizing politically,' argues Ortiz. 'The FBI and the Klan would share a common goal and a common foe, as the CIA and the Guatemalan security forces did. And if the FBI regularly paid Klan members for information on black leaders and their plans, knowing that the KKK derived that information by torturing blacks and then murdering them . . . [then] this scenario . . . describes . . . torture and murder by proxy' (431–432).

Why would a death squad invest time and personnel in threatening, abducting and torturing a novice nun? According to Sister Dianna, her captors interrogated her about a couple with whom she had stayed and who belonged to an organization, the Mutual Support Group (GAM), for relatives of people whom the security forces had kidnapped. The army regarded GAM as a guerrilla front. Ortiz' torturers also wanted her to admit that her real name was Verónica Ortiz Hernández, apparently an actual guerrilla who was later killed. In other words, her torturers were looking for a link between rural guerrillas and the urban left. Identifying her as a suspect required only the malice or stupidity that has fed so many victims into the Guatemalan army's clandestine machinery.

David Stoll