

## MI TÍA: Stories of a Murdered Scholar in Guatemala

Lydia A. Saravia

*She says* to me, “You look like her.” A compliment, I am sure. But I do not look like her. Not even close. I am the spitting image of my mother. “No, no. Para nada,” I tell her. Sí, she insists. I smile and nod. I am not in search of a kindred spirit. This is an exercise in recovering family history. She might have been the only family member on my father’s side with whom I might have actually gotten along. Who knows? Maybe not. But this is also an intellectual quest. A murdered scholar, educator, and intellectual. As a current scholar, educator, wannabe intellectual, I have a duty to recover this history.

I enter his office. He closes the door behind him. Tell me again, he asks, what is it that you want to know? Nothing specific, I tell him. I’m just looking for whatever information I can find on Lucila Rodas de Villagrán. He begins to talk, telling me stories he knows. The more he talks, the more visibly nervous he gets. But he does not stop talking. Instead, he opens his desk drawer, takes out a cigarette and begins to smoke as he continues to share information that he thinks I might find valuable. “I’m telling you because I believe it is necessary to rescue historical memory”: “Es necesario el rescate de la historia y memoria.” But, he warns, not everyone feels the same.

“She was my professor at the university. Great professor,” says another man. As we walk through the cobblestone streets, I ask him if maybe I can sit down with him and interview him. He nods yes, but does not say yes, nor does he look at me. He only says, “It’s still really difficult for me to talk about that time. I still cry.” As we continue to walk down the street, he points to

landmarks where someone was killed, where he hid so the police wouldn't find him. I let him tell me about the history within the cobblestone street, but I do not press for an interview.

"I still see some of the men who did it," a person close to her reveals. "One of them is a paraplegic and goes to the same hospital I do. Sometimes the doctor sees me in the same room where it happened."

Most people I encountered in Guatemala during my initial quest to find information regarding my father's aunt's murder have been happy to speak to me, with no tape recorder. They talked about the fact that she was intelligent. That she was an educator. Everyone observed that she was very, very short but a very, very well-dressed woman. Many spoke about how they respected and feared her. When she walked down the hall, one woman revealed, students moved for her. But not many people talk about her activism or her political affiliations.

The nervous man who lit his cigarette in his office claimed that she used to say that she wasn't one centimeter taller because with her height she could make the world shake: "No medía un centímetro más porque con lo que media podía hacer temblar al mundo."

Some say she didn't have many friends. Others say she had many friends.

It is never quite clear who a person might have been. You can ask ten people about one person, and they will have ten versions of that person—depending on the kind of relationship they had with that one person.

Was she friendly? Was she not?

So you look for the constants—the details that seem to be present in

everyone's version of that person. And try to imagine the gaps—maybe pick and choose the details that create the ideal version of that person you never met, didn't know, and can only imagine.

Then, of course, your mind imagines the inevitable: would you have gotten along with her? Would you have liked her? Would she have liked you?

Truth is, I'm speaking about my father's tía, a woman murdered when I was about to turn four. A woman I never met. A woman who, had she not been murdered, I most likely would have never met. My father did not exactly keep in touch with his family. In his old age, he has sought them out. But today she would have been ninety-four. Maybe alive. Maybe not.

These are versions of her story, as told to me by strangers who trusted me and were brave enough to tell me stories. But no one knows why, exactly, she was murdered.

Her murder:

During the centennial celebration of INSO (Instituto Normal para Señoritas de Oriente), the Institute for Young Women who want to become educators, the institution was being renovated. Rodas de Villagrán was the directora of the school. Because of the renovations to the INSO building, the young women at the school were taking evening classes at the INVO (Instituto Normal para Varones de Oriente), the brother school, the Institute for Young Men who want to become educators. On her way out of the INVO building, she was gunned down by machine gun. "I am embarrassed to tell you this, but none of us would help her and none of us would ride in the ambulance with her because we were scared," a former colleague of my father's tía confesses. She was taken to the hospital, on September 23, 1980. A few days later, four

masked men entered the room where she was recovering and killed her. They shoved to the ground family members and doctors who were in the room, and shot her. Finally killing her.

Lucila Rodas Hidalgo viuda de Villagrán, was murdered on September 23, 1980 in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. A former PGT (Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo) member, Rodas de Villagrán was a curricularist, an educator, and an activist—most likely executed for her involvement with student groups, but mostly accused as a communist for her involvement with and support of President Juan José Arévalo (President from 1945 to 1951) and the PGT. In 1965, Rodas de Villagrán wrote her graduate school thesis on the state of education for women: *Desarrollo histórico de la educación de la mujer y su situación actual*.

According to the people I interviewed, she was a communist (which explains her membership in PGT). None of them deny this fact. Some say she traveled with Che Guevara when he was in Guatemala, meeting with him. Some say she often traveled to Cuba to meet with Fidel Castro. No one, however, can prove any of these stories are true. Those close to her admit that she was a supporter of Juan José Arévalo. That she held campaign meetings in her home. One woman says, but cannot guarantee, that she heard that Rodas de Villagrán was mentor to three young women who left school, in early 1980, to join the guerillas in the mountains. It is assumed, this woman told me, that Rodas de Villagrán might have advised them to join the guerillas. Maybe. After all, the PGT became the URNG, Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca.<sup>1</sup> She could have been their intellectual adviser. But no one knows for sure.

Some believe her support of Arévalo, president from 1945 to 1951, is the one and only reason for her murder.

In her thesis, she claims that “the revolutionary governments of Arévalo and Arbenz realized social, political and economic content that reflected the progress of men and women” (45). She lists the several educational programs and literacy movements from their administrations as evidence of a progressive democratic system.

Who is Juan José Arévalo?

It is argued that President Juan José Arévalo Bermejo (1945–1951) made popular education a priority and that during his presidency he addressed rural education. In 1949, Arévalo launched the Humanities Faculty at the Guatemalan national university, San Carlos. In 1949, Arévalo established the federation school that allowed “each classroom [to] set its own educational goals and plans of study” (Smith and Adams, 2011). Further, his administration reformed elementary education and modernized its structure and pedagogy. To give student laborers an opportunity to continue their education, classes were held during the morning and during the evening. In addition to structural and curriculum changes, Arévalo’s administration began a national literacy campaign that dispatched mobile cultural workshops and established an *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* that cooperated in the production of bilingual materials in K’iche’, Mam, Kaqchikel, and Q’eqchi. His work toward educating the masses, including the workers made Arévalo popular among communist Guatemalans.

Maybe support for this past president was enough to make my father’s tía a threat in 1980.

In my initial quest, I look for the remaining artifacts: her thesis, a photograph of her at the public library. I look for anything that might shed some light as to who my father’s tía was and why she was such a threat in 1980.

Doing an online search, I learned that she wrote a thesis in 1965. Because I was in Guatemala, I decided to visit the university she graduated from and where she subsequently taught. I walked into the library and asked if they had a copy of the thesis. I read off the title, the name of the author, and the year it was published. The librarian looked at me and said, “No. We throw all the old stuff away.” He didn’t look it up. He simply said, “It’s been discarded.” But before he repeated that old work is thrown out, he asked for the title again. I read it to him: “Desarrollo histórico de la educación de la mujer y su situación actual.” He replied, “That? In 1965?” Yes. That. In 1965. “Well, we throw everything away,” he repeated. But I remembered something a woman I talked to had said, “You ask anyone my age or older, and they know who she is.” And I cannot help but wonder, did he recognize the name?

Regardless, I got on a computer, googled her thesis title, and, it turns out, University of Illinois at Urbana had a copy. So I ordered it.

At the public library in Xela, Guatemala, they used to have a display of portraits of all the important and influential women of Xela. These pictures are no longer up because when it rains, the water seeps through the walls, and the pictures—these artifacts—have been getting destroyed by the water. The pictures are now in storage. But a librarian allowed me to go through them to find what I was looking for: the picture of her. Looking through all the frames of all the influential women of Xela, I finally come across the framed picture of my father’s aunt. The librarian allows me to take pictures, and I scribble the epitaph: “Elocuente profesional, nacida en la Ciudad de Quetzaltenango el día 30 y uno de Octubre de mil novecientos doce. Mística mujer ilustre, estrella luminosa, radiante de sabiduría, perfumada rosa. Musa de la poesía, canto de amor, orgullo de esta Guatemala.” Despite this poetic dedication, there is no mention of her murder or her activist work.

The *Diccionario Enciclopédico de Guatemala*, reveals her educational background and has a brief mention of her murder, reading, “Directora del INSO hasta su muerte, ocurrida trágicamente por la brutal represión política de la época en Quetzaltenango,” but there is no mention of what her political beliefs and affiliations might have been.

When, as a little girl, I would hear my dad speak of this aunt, it was always during a drunken night of family talk. The details were always bare: A widow. A teacher. No children. Killed. My father is not a story-teller. His parents never spoke to me about any family history, if they spoke to me at all. No one seems to want to talk about her. She seems to be the oddball in the family, though. No one on my father’s side seems to be politically involved. They could still be operating under fear. Maybe. Or they might be a generation too young to know anything about her and her possible political involvement. Regardless, her death is a mystery buried among many mysteries in Guatemala’s history.

The search for her story has just begun.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Known as a guerrilla movement that opposed military governments in Guatemala in the 1980s.

## References

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