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THURSDAY

July 23, 1992

GUATEMALA CITY

Maritza did not look like a revolutionary. She was just one of the young mothers walking their children to school in the morning. Her *organización*, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor—an insurgent group commonly known by its Spanish acronym EGP and referred to here as the Organización—had trained Maritza about the importance of blending in with the crowd so as to avoid detection by the Guatemalan army. She wore no uniform and carried no weapon. A white sweater protected Maritza from the early morning chill and underneath she wore a T-shirt from Albuquerque, New Mexico, where her brother, Edmundo René, had studied political science. Maritza had loafers on her feet and in the pockets of her green pants only her house keys and the thirty cents she would need to make a telephone call after dropping off Sebastián. She carried nothing that could fall into the hands of *el enemigo*.

Perhaps the most striking physical characteristic of this petite woman was her hair: a mass of long, unruly coffee-colored curls that flowed past Maritza's shoulders, with a streak of gray above her forehead. Sebastián, a precocious four-year-old with dark hair and his mother's large dark eyes, liked nothing better than to play with his toy cars and trucks or to color with crayons. That morning he was dressed in his school uniform of red pants, white shirt, and red sweater.

As they neared Boulevard de Liberación, the broad avenue that sepa-

rates zone eight from zone thirteen of Guatemala City, just a few blocks from Sebastián's school, another mother waved to Maritza. She had already dropped off her daughter and was returning to her home in zone eight, not far from where Maritza lived with her parents. Would Maritza like to come by her house that afternoon? The woman sold jewelry from her home and had some earrings she wanted to show to Maritza. Of course! Maritza promised to drop by later that day.

Mother and son crossed the broad boulevard just after 8:00 A.M., and as they walked up Fifth Avenue toward Third Street, dozens of people filled the muddy thoroughfare. Men and women left their homes for work; mothers walked their children to school; young maids stood in the doorways of their employers' homes; shopkeepers hung out in front of their stores, chatting with the passersby. The sounds of planes taking off from the nearby airport and the heavy morning traffic filled the air.

Maritza was alert as she walked down Third Street with her little boy and neared Walt Disney Nursery School. Just outside the school on the previous day, Maritza had spotted the men who kept her under surveillance. The first man followed Maritza for almost four blocks after she said good-bye to Sebastián. Then he stopped and spoke to another man. A third man observed Maritza as she arrived at her bus stop. He stayed on the corner when Maritza boarded the number forty bus. Maritza didn't know at the time that her house was also under surveillance.

Later that day Maritza spoke with her superiors in the Organización. They agreed that Maritza should start to change her daily routine and move out of her parents' house. But there was no need to panic. Maritza could make these changes gradually over the next month.

As Maritza and Sebastián walked the final few blocks to the school, she was relieved to see that the men were not there. Maritza did not want to accept the fact she had been identified, and so she minimized the significance of the surveillance. The men were gone. She could relax. And so, like every morning, Maritza kissed Sebastián's cheek at the nursery school entrance and told him that she would take him home again at noon.

But the men were not gone. There were nearly ten of them that day, hidden in three separate cars parked some distance from the nursery school. One of the vehicles, parked among other automobiles outside a nearby factory, had a clear view of the entrance to Walt Disney School. As Maritza bade her son farewell and started back toward her home, the men inside this vehicle radioed her position to their commander, "Don

Chando.”* He sat in a Toyota Corolla with tinted windows that was parked around the corner on Fifth Avenue, just up the street from the route that Maritza would take on her way home.

Maritza was still alert as she walked away from the school up Third Street to the corner of Fifth Avenue, and then down the slope toward Boulevard de Liberación. Older children were walking to school and more men and women hurried off to catch the bus to work. After crossing Second Street, Maritza passed “Diana,” who was walking her daughter to Walt Disney School.¹ From another automobile, “El Chino” radioed to Don Chando that Maritza was coming toward them now.

As Maritza approached First Street, she was surprised to see the jewelry vendor walking toward her, the same woman she had spoken to earlier that morning. But now the woman was on the opposite side of the street. Strange, because the jewelry vendor had already left her child at the school. The woman hailed Maritza again and spoke to her from across the street, briefly distracting Maritza as she continued to walk toward her home.

Perhaps that explains why Maritza never saw the large man who fell on her and covered her mouth with his hand and held her arms against her ribs. Or why she never noticed the second man, who almost simultaneously rushed up behind her and grabbed her arms.

Maritza screamed and tried in vain to free herself. “Oh no!” Her scream was a realization rather than a protest. She’d come to her end. There was no return. A white car with darkened windows pulled up and the back door flew open. The two men who held Maritza threw her onto the backseat, knocking one of her shoes off into the road. The men climbed in after her as the car rolled forward. A third man, his skin very pale, sat in the passenger seat next to the driver. The fair-skinned man glanced at Maritza and spoke into a radio: “We’ve got her. Go for the other.”² Maritza was terrified. Later she realized that he was the same man who had followed her the day before.

TEGUCIGALPA, HONDURAS

February 1954 Two sisters stood by the side of the dusty airstrip, waiting to board the plane that would take them to a secret destination. Sonia Orellana was eighteen and Sara just one year older. Full of adoles-

*A pseudonym or alias—set inside quotation marks at first mention only—is used (as here) to protect the security of particular Guatemalan sources.

cent passion, the girls knew a great quest lay ahead of them that morning, although they didn't know specifically what it was. They were going to save Guatemala from the claws of Communism.

A slender man with a mustache and dark skin approached them and the sisters recognized him instantly. He was Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, a Guatemalan army officer living in exile in Honduras, and the CIA's chosen leader of the "liberation movement" to oust the government of Jacobo Árbenz.

"Are you calm?"

"Yes, Colonel."

"You're not sad?"

"No," they replied, although the two girls had no idea where they were going or why. But they would do anything to help the "liberation movement." "You're going to be well cared for and you're going to do a good job," Castillo Armas reassured them. "You're going to write a page in the country's history."³

Sonia and Sara flew first to San Salvador, and then on to Miami. Waiting for them at the Miami airport was a "Mr. López," who had visited their father many times in their home-in-exile in Tegucigalpa. Mr. López was a North American who spoke bad Spanish and whose real name was Davis. Mr. López brought the girls to a palatial estate in Florida where they would spend the next few months.⁴ There was a recording studio on the grounds of the estate, and every morning beginning at 9:00 A.M. and working into the evening, Sonia, Sara, and a small group of other young Guatemalans prepared their *escríps* and produced radio programs attacking the Árbenz government:

This is the voice of Clandestine Radio—the radio of liberation. . . .

The heroic people of Guatemala, who for more than ten years have endured the savage oppression of international Communism, have lost their patience and are preparing for the final battle. . . .

And Jacobo Árbenz and his ruffians will see that patriots know how to defend their ideal: GOD, COUNTRY, LIBERTY. . . .

GUATEMALANS, THE HOUR IS NEAR. WE WILL KNOW HOW TO GIVE YOU THE WORD, BUT MEANWHILE, DON'T LET YOURSELVES BE FOOLED. THE COMMUNIST PULP WILL BE CRUSHED, AND WITH IT, ALL OF ITS HIRED GUNS. THE HOURS OF COMMUNISM ARE NUMBERED . . . ⁵

A nice young North American man named Chuck taught the Guatemalans how to use the modern equipment. After each broadcast was recorded in Florida, the tapes were sent on Pan Am flights to Honduras, where the "liberationists" maintained their transmitter. The messages

were beamed into Guatemala where, at night, behind closed doors, opponents of Jacobo Árbenz would pick up the signal.⁶

After some months in Florida, the two sisters returned to Central America to continue the radio broadcasts. First they operated from a farm just inside Nicaragua near the Honduran border where Castillo Armas and his men were preparing for the invasion of Guatemala. Trying to increase popular sentiment for an uprising, Sonia and Sara would falsely declare that they were brazenly broadcasting from a secret location within Guatemala.

The VOICE OF NATIONAL LIBERATION, transmitter of the free people, initiated its work in spite of the government, which, trembling even more, has dispatched all of its dogs in order to locate it. The movement of Guatemalan resistance isn't weak any more. On the contrary, it's now a gigantic force which the red government fears and . . . trembles in terror.⁷

From Nicaragua the sisters returned to Honduras, to the farm of their maternal grandparents, where they continued their broadcasts while the “liberation army” completed its final phase of training. Critical to the strategy of the CIA was the demoralization of the Guatemalan army:

With true stupor, we've been informed of the incident that occurred between the Defense Minister, Colonel José Ángel Sánchez, and one of the high-ranking commanders of the Air Force, when the latter returned to his home and found the DIGNIFIED MINISTER making love with his once honorable wife. . . .

We in exile view the immorality that now reigns in some military commanders as a true threat to the dignity and security of the army since these acts of savagery denigrate the institution and upset the morale of the soldier. This is a fruit of Marxist doctrine, which favors free love.⁸

Sonia and Sara Orellana were the daughters of Manuel Orellana, an anti-Communist leader working in exile with Colonel Castillo Armas. The exiles in Honduras were not acting alone, but in concert with the anti-Communist organizations inside Guatemala organized and encouraged by the CIA.⁹ “The basic key to all operational planning,” explained one CIA memorandum at the time, “is the realization that the strength of our movement is going to be from *within* the target country rather than being in the nature of an ‘invasion’ from without.”¹⁰

Consequently, the Catholic Church and the media were active in the campaign to oust Árbenz.¹¹ The Catholic clergy “worked like ants” to bring down the Árbenz government, and the stress caused stomach problems for Monsignor Mariano Rossell Arellano, the tall and distinguished

archbishop.¹² Several right-wing, anti-government newspapers were in circulation, such as *La Opinión*, whose masthead read “Newspaper of the poor, and also of the rich.”¹³ And there were a number of fiercely anti-Communist journalists. But none of them was fiercer, tougher, more dogmatic and radical than a radio journalist named Oscar Conde.

Born of a union between a father of mixed Spanish blood and a mother who was part Mayan and part African, Conde was tall and dark, with wavy black hair and a black moustache. He was also quite thin, which sharpened his features and only added to his intensity. Conde was a leader of PUA, the Party of Anti-Communist Unity, and through his program called *Radio Sucesos* was by far the most widely listened to of the anti-Communist radio journalists of the Árbenz period.

Every day at lunchtime in this pretelevision era, families in thousands of homes around Guatemala City would cut short their conversation and tune in to Oscar Conde. Even his friends, who admired him, acknowledged that Conde was “violent, dogmatic, obnoxious if you will.”¹⁴ Conde could not stand anyone who bore the slightest taint of left-wingism, and he relentlessly criticized the Árbenz regime and its members.

The defection of army personnel was another key component of the CIA’s strategy for overthrowing Árbenz. The agency had infiltrated the armed forces and by late May 1954 the CIA’s station chief in Guatemala City was reporting that the Guatemalan army would not resist their “liberation”:

The army is reportedly divided into two groups: the older officers, and the younger officers. The older officers are determined to form a “junta” as soon as any action starts and then try to make a deal with Castillo Armas and the “Americans.” The younger officers are reportedly decided not to fire a shot or else go over to Castillo Armas.¹⁵

In early June, officials at the Guatemalan Embassy in Tegucigalpa picked up rumors indicating that the attack was imminent:

A group of exiles that eat in one of the downtown restaurants in Tegucigalpa came to eat supper on Sunday night after having a few drinks. Thus, it slipped out that THE FIFTEENTH OF THIS MONTH WILL BE the date of the invasion.¹⁶

But it would not be much of an invasion. CIA officials were aghast when Colonel Castillo Armas confessed that he only had one hundred and fifty men under his command. This news forced the agency to reevaluate its plans, but ultimately the agents in command decided to go forward. Castillo Armas’s “movement” might become even weaker if they

postponed the invasion, and the possibility of gathering sympathizers along the way kept the CIA's goal within reach.¹⁷ The *Voice of Liberation* broadcast a series of warnings to the Guatemalan people. Everyone should withdraw money from their bank accounts, buy food and durable goods, try to get valuables out of the country. Don't support the "out-law regime."¹⁸ Fortuitously for Castillo Armas and the CIA, Guatemala's state-run radio required a new antenna in May. This problem knocked out power to the government's only broadcast medium for three weeks. So the largely illiterate populace turned to the *Voice of Liberation* for news, giving the liberationists a virtual propaganda monopoly.¹⁹

When they finally entered Guatemala on June 18, 1954, Castillo Armas and his soldiers carried with them the Radio of Liberation's transmitter, accompanied by the only two women in the invading force, the young sisters Sonia and Sara Orellana. Radio broadcasts might still be needed to swing the Guatemalan army over to Castillo Armas's side.²⁰ People came out into the streets of small towns to offer the liberators food and water. "It was a party," Sonia recalled many years later, "we weren't afraid."²¹ They camped in the town of Esquipulas, home of Guatemala's patron saint, and there the two girls made their last clandestine radio broadcast, exhorting the population to join the uprising.²²

GUATEMALA CITY

Thursday morning, July 23, 1992 In the back of the car, Maritza struggled to free herself but the men began to beat her. They covered her mouth with their hands and forced her head down between her legs until Maritza began to feel dizzy. When they put a sweater over her head, Maritza thought that she would suffocate. Finally, they've taken me. It's finally happened.

Then the men began to speak. "We know that you're 'Ruth.' You have to do what we tell you, or else you know what will happen to you." They spoke of Sebastián. "Your son is very cute. We've seen the two of you together. You have a good relationship with him."²³ Maritza began to feel even more terrified. What will they do to Sebastián?

The same voice spoke to her again. "Cooperate with us and nothing's going to happen to you. We know that you're Ruth." He seemed to be in charge. After fifteen or twenty minutes the car slowed and passed over some speed bumps. They passed through a wide gate and stopped in a large garage containing a red bus and many other vehicles. The men covered Maritza's face with a piece of newspaper.

They pulled Maritza into the bus's front seat and handcuffed her, taking care to put paper in the metal handcuffs and placing them over the sleeves of her sweater so as not to cut Maritza's wrists. The men took her keys and her watch, telling her they would return them later. Someone brought Maritza a pair of large tennis shoes and told her to put them on.

A group of men sat near Maritza in the red bus and began to interrogate her. "We know that you're Ruth. We want information. We have your letters."²⁴ They brought a packet of letters that Maritza had written to "Esteban," her ex-husband and Sebastián's father. The Organización had assigned Esteban to the "Ho Chi Minh front," in the mountains far to the north of Guatemala City. Maritza sent him letters via a secret mail system, but someone had intercepted her letters.

The fair-skinned man spoke to her. "We want you to be calm because we have your son. Did you listen to me when I spoke on the radio? They went to get your son at the school. *No problem*. Your son is fine. A special person is taking care of him. He's eating cookies. He's fine."²⁵ Maritza was crying, nearly going crazy with worry. "My son, my son," she kept repeating. "You're going to see your son again," replied the fair-skinned man. "If you cooperate with us."²⁶

The men showed Maritza three letters she had written to Esteban. They showed her photos of Sebastián, photos Maritza had included with her letters, and Maritza began to feel sick.

In the months before her disappearance, Maritza had sent a total of four letters and an audiocassette to her ex-husband. This correspondence was captured when the army intercepted and killed the Organización's mail carrier. The letters described the road construction that occurred near Maritza's home during early 1992. Moreover, the cassette contained the sounds of jets taking off and landing at Guatemala's International Airport. So whoever intercepted the recording would know that the voice belonged to a woman who lived close to the airport.²⁷

Maritza never used her true name in her letters to Esteban and always referred to Sebastián as "the dwarf" or "the little kid." Nevertheless, she made the mistake of remarking that she had enrolled Sebastián in "the school near the airport" that Maritza attended as a little girl. She also included photographs of Sebastián in some of the letters and mentioned that she walked him to school everyday. Maritza's captors probably identified Sebastián as he entered and left Walt Disney School and, through the boy, his mother.²⁸

Her captors had other photographs as well. They showed Maritza photos of her brother, her mother, her brother-in-law, and her nephew. They

had a photograph of Sebastián playing outside near Maritza's house. "Your son likes to play in the street in the afternoon. We've seen him."²⁹ There was a photo of Maritza's house and her car. "The car. Why isn't it registered in your name?" Maritza told them that her ex-husband had purchased the vehicle.

The men demanded Esteban's true name. The Organización had trained Maritza about interrogations and she knew that she had to tell them something. If you were captured, you should give a mixture of the truth and fiction. You have to confuse the enemy. Esteban was far away in the rugged mountains of El Quiché. So Maritza gave up his name: Carlos Barrientos Aragón. One of the men left the vehicle and returned a short time later with some paper in his hand.

They had a file on Esteban, but it contained only information through 1982, when Esteban was an EGP leader in Guatemala City. At that time, members of an army intelligence unit raided a house near Guatemala City where Esteban slept. Tipped off, Esteban fled the home ahead of his pursuers, but in his haste, he left photographs of himself and weapons behind. So the army opened a file on Esteban, but it had no new information about him for the last ten years. Now the men pushed Maritza harder. "Tell us about Esteban!" But she resisted.³⁰ She hadn't seen him in years.

Her captors explained that they were members of a very secret organization. They were not part of the army, but they pursued any person who endangered the security of the nation. They took action against subversives, drug traffickers, even against members of the armed forces if they posed a threat to Guatemala. If Maritza wanted to get her son back, she would have to tell them how to find Esteban.³¹ Maritza stalled for time. Esteban had left her two and a half years ago. She didn't know how to contact him. Maritza explained that she sent Esteban letters via a woman named "Argelia," a name that she made up.

The men continued to press her. Her son was all right, but she had to give them information. If Maritza wanted to see her son again, she would have to give them something: a telephone number, an address, a contact person. They knew that Maritza had been involved with "subversive organizations." She would have to give them information if she wanted to free herself and reunite with her son. The men asked Maritza questions about her brother, Edmundo René, and her sister, Carolina, and showed her copies of her siblings' passports. After reading another of her letters, the men told Maritza that they were sure that she was involved in something subversive. No, she was a mother. Her only interest was her son.

The men forced Maritza to take a pill that made her feel drowsy. “I’m sleepy!” she cried. She was trembling and crying with fear. All Maritza could think about was her Sebastián. She wanted to return home and hug him and know that he was safe.

But the men would not let her rest. “We know you’re not just anyone. Your husband is an important person. He’s been involved in ‘subversive organizations’ since he was very young.”³² Maritza explained that she knew little of Esteban’s political activity. They had met in a party in Mexico in 1986. They had a child together, but they had been separated for two and a half years. She didn’t have any of the information that they wanted.

One of the men said that they had to make a phone call. They took Maritza out of the red bus and put her in another car. After driving a short distance within the installation, the men took her out of the car again. Maritza could see some olive green backpacks and some military weapons leaning against a wall, and she assumed that she was in an army compound.

The men told Maritza that she was going to call her family. She was going to tell her father to go and pick up Sebastián at his school. Perhaps they don’t really have my little boy? Part of her life returned to Maritza. But she was also confused, afraid, and nervous. What mental game were they playing with her? She had left Sebastián safe in his school. But perhaps they *did* have Sebastián, only now they were trying to trick her into thinking he was safe.³³ These men are professionals. They know what they’re doing.

The men brought Maritza to a bathroom. They told her to act like everything was fine when she spoke to her parents. Maritza should tell them she was with a friend. The men brought a telephone and called Maritza’s family via a switchboard. When Maritza’s mother, Pilar, answered the phone, Maritza used a tone of voice that was unusual for her. She sensed from the worried tone of Pilar’s voice that her mother already knew something was wrong. Maritza told her mother that she was with her friend Sandra. “Don’t worry. Could Papá please go and pick up Sebastián at school?”

After the call, Maritza fought back. “My family already knows!” she told them. “They’re going to stir things up! And we have friends in the army.”³⁴ Her captors were unimpressed. One of the men left the bathroom and returned a few moments later. Maritza would have to call Sandra and tell her to reassure Maritza’s parents that Maritza was fine.

The men dialed the phone and Maritza asked Sandra to call her fam-

ily and tell them that Maritza was with her. Sandra said that she would telephone, but Maritza's tone of voice worried her. "What's happening?" she asked.

"I'm fine," replied Maritza. "Please do me this favor."³⁵

After the telephone calls, the interrogation began again inside the bathroom. In the past, Maritza had read a great deal about revolutionaries who were captured by *el enemigo*, about the methods of interrogation in countries like Argentina, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Maritza's captors seemed to be fighting for time. Why? She was frightened, but Maritza knew she had to tell the men as little as possible. When the men let slip that they did not have Sebastián, they made an important tactical error. Maritza knew that if she could minimize the information she gave them, then perhaps only *her* life would be at stake.³⁶ Soon Maritza's *compañeros* in the Organización would begin to move to secure locations. She had to win time in order to protect her contacts, who were scattered around Guatemala City.³⁷ So Maritza spoke about her family, and about her distant relatives. And she tried to prepare herself for her last battle.

June 1954 Maritza's paternal grandmother, Ester de Urrutia, wife of a printer and mother of seven children, was the vice secretary general of the Guatemalan Women's Alliance (AFG), considered by many to be the women's branch of the Árbenz government and of PGT, the Guatemalan Communist Party.³⁸ The Women's Alliance fought hard for women's rights and especially to increase the participation of Guatemalan women in the country's public and political affairs.³⁹ At the time, it was the most important women's organization in the nation.⁴⁰

And for revolutionary women like Ester de Urrutia, an early feminist who lived for politics, the Women's Alliance was also a social welfare organization that provided services to needy women and to Guatemala's poor.⁴¹ Although she never studied beyond the third grade, Ester founded a number of literacy and civic education centers where adults and children came to learn to read and write. Most of these centers were established in the markets where groups of volunteers would come to educate the women vendors. But Ester even set one up in her family's home in zone eight of Guatemala City. With her daughter Julia, Ester also started cafeterias for children who had no place to eat.⁴² Short and stocky, always simply dressed, with a streak of gray running down the middle of her dark hair, Doña Estercita, as she was known in her community, was a natural orator and politician, and during the early 1950s she traveled throughout Guatemala, to El Salvador, and to Eastern Europe on behalf

of the Women's Alliance and the revolutionary government of president Jacobo Árbenz.⁴³

In pursuit of his dream to transform Guatemala, Jacobo Árbenz implemented the first agrarian reform program in Guatemala since 1524, when the ruthless Pedro de Alvarado subjugated what is today Central America on behalf of the Spanish Crown. Guatemala's Mayan peoples were largely enslaved and exploited, their many cultures nearly destroyed during the five centuries that passed between the Spanish conquest and the October 1944 revolution. But during the early 1950s the reform-minded President Árbenz expropriated over a million acres of untilled land, which he redistributed to thousands of landless peasants, provided small farmers with access to credit, and began a literacy campaign in the predominantly Mayan communities in the countryside.⁴⁴

President Árbenz's successful agrarian reform program was largely the "brainchild" of the Guatemalan Communist Party. During the Árbenz era, the springtime of Guatemala's revolution, Guatemalans on the left like young Roberto Paz y Paz wanted to transform the feudal economic structures in place in their society. "We were all 'Nerudanos,'" Roberto recalled four decades later, referring to the famed Chilean poet who wrote "Love Song for Stalingrad." "Romantics. And Communism seemed beautiful."⁴⁵

Now with the Guatemalan Revolution facing the ominous threat of U.S. intervention, the Women's Alliance tried to defend its country. A number of the women received an emergency course in nursing, and some of them began to sleep in the hospitals. In case of bloodshed, they'd be there to assist the nurses on duty. Ester de Urrutia and a young colleague, Atala Valenzuela, read proclamations on all of the pro-government radio stations denouncing the imminent invasion and the danger facing the nation.⁴⁶

Thousands of men, many of them organized by unions or political parties, offered to fight on behalf of the Árbenz government; but they needed weapons from the army, and the Guatemalan army had lost its nerve.⁴⁷ On June 25 the officer corps, convinced that their resistance would lead to an overwhelming U.S. invasion, called on Árbenz to resign. Finally, on the evening of June 27, 1954, an exhausted Árbenz resigned in order to eliminate the pretext for the U.S.-sponsored "invasion."

Within the diplomatic community, no one doubted that the United States would decide who would take the reins of power.⁴⁸ But the U.S. government faced an awkward choice. Apart from the persecutions carried out by the new regime, the Eisenhower administration knew that it might face repercussions throughout the Americas for installing a mer-

cenary government in Guatemala. One high-ranking CIA operative was a bit defensive about the situation: “Instead of yelling about Yankee imperialism and invasion, the free world should be grateful that a handful of brave but maybe pathetically comical exiles got the pitch and decided to do something about it.”⁴⁹

On July 9 Castillo Armas, the United States’ trusted friend, was proclaimed president of Guatemala’s provisional junta.⁵⁰ Anti-Communist repression swept the country.⁵¹ All political parties that had supported Árbenz, whether Communist or not, were banned.⁵² Rumors circulated about bands of masked men who were killing the revolutionaries.⁵³ Indeed, the CIA had included the elimination of “top-flight Communists” in its Guatemala strategy since 1952 and had repeatedly discussed “disposal lists” of Árbenz sympathizers who warranted assassination or imprisonment.⁵⁴ Of course, the names of Ester de Urrutia and her colleagues in the Guatemalan Women’s Alliance went directly into the military government’s new Black Book.⁵⁵ According to the Law against Communism, imposed by Castillo Armas in August 1954, inclusion in this register created a “grave presumption of dangerousness” and authorized a suspect’s indefinite imprisonment without charge or trial.

Soon the embassies of Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Brazil, Costa Rica, and El Salvador were full of Arbencistas seeking shelter from the terror. Julia Urrutia, Ester’s oldest daughter, heard a radio broadcast reporting that Oscar Conde, the well-known anti-Communist radio journalist, was moving about Guatemala City with the police, singling out alleged Communists for arrest. “They’re like rats!” said Conde of the fleeing Arbencistas.⁵⁶ Representatives of the new military regime announced that supporters of Árbenz would be arrested and—as punishment for being Communists—sent to the isolated province of El Petén.⁵⁷ This vast tropical region of sweltering, mosquito-infested jungles and swamps had few roads, towns, or modern facilities. If the heat and malaria did not kill the banished “Communists,” the isolation would drive them mad.

Julia Urrutia knew that her aging mother would die in El Petén. So Julia took Ester and five of her brothers and sisters to the Argentine Embassy, where nearly two hundred people sought asylum and safe passage out of the country.

Then Julia went to find her father. Manuel was still at work at PGT’s newspaper, *Octubre*, although soon the paper would be shut down. Tall, thin, and balding, with big ears and dark bags under his eyes, Manuel resisted the idea of going into exile. “I’m not involved in anything!”⁵⁸

he protested to his daughter. But apart from his printing duties, Manuel also helped sell *Octubre* on the streets of Guatemala City, which publicly linked him with PGT. In the months leading up to Árbenz's resignation, right-wing activists painted the word "Communists" on the Urrutia family's house. Julia eventually convinced her father of the danger he was in and brought Manuel to the Argentine Embassy, where he joined his wife and most of his children.

All together, one hundred and eighty-eight persons took refuge within the small Argentine Embassy. There was Raul Sierra Franco, a former government minister, prominent congressmen, and PGT leaders like Víctor Manuel Gutiérrez, doctors, lawyers, union leaders, Communist Party members, and others linked to the party.⁵⁹ Ernesto "Che" Guevara was there; an unknown but aspiring young revolutionary who would later win fame during the Cuban revolution.⁶⁰ Che, an Argentinean, passed the time reading and playing chess, while Ester and Manuel cooked for the refugees.⁶¹ Che needed a special diet. "I'm an asthmatic, señora," he explained to Ester, "so I only eat boiled vegetables."⁶² So Ester prepared boiled vegetables especially for Che.

Some of the refugees in the Argentine Mission fought from within the embassy to keep the Guatemalan Revolution alive. "Take all measures to assure the maintenance of the union movement," instructed a note probably written by the PGT leader Gutiérrez to a colleague, "even in this period of repression unleashed by imperialism: you must not faint, since the consciousness created in ten years cannot be destroyed just like that."⁶³

Family members of some refugees were appalled by their relatives' decision to go into exile and did what they could to prevent them from leaving Guatemala. "Mr. Ambassador," wrote an anguished father to Julio Leguizamon on August 5, 1954:

Permit me to interrupt your busy affairs to consult you about the case of my son . . . who since the fall of Colonel Árbenz's regime has been sheltered in the embassy of which you are in charge.

The case is, Mr. Ambassador, that I want my son . . . to leave the asylum that he has generously been given there. He is no more than a youngster without any experience in life. He's not a politician, nor a leader of any significance. I believe that he has not caused harm to anyone, nor ever performed a public function.

I think that his asylum is due, more than anything, to advice of some colleagues and friends on the one hand, and to a certain panic, product of the natural nervousness produced by the fall of the prior regime, but I sincerely don't see the need that he receive asylum.⁶⁴

Argentine Embassy officials apparently had a different opinion of the young man. The Argentines included him in their list of “Communist Party activists” who had sought asylum in their embassy.⁶⁵

Another worried parent honestly explained to the ambassador her son’s real motive for requesting asylum:

I am the mother of . . . , sheltered in your embassy, for reasons unknown. He has never had political connections that I know of. The only thing that I imagine is that he wants to gain the opportunity to see another country. He believes that he will get the same attentions and favors in another country as he has received in the embassy.⁶⁶

For three hot and humid months, the refugees became increasingly bored and desperate as they waited within the embassy grounds for safe passage to Argentina. They began to fight among themselves as tensions increased, and after the first month passed under these conditions, Julia Urrutia became concerned about her parents’ health.

Julia had decided not to seek asylum. She was relatively apolitical, and she had a husband and three children of her own to care for. Naively, she decided to seek assistance from Adan Serrano, the interior minister for the new military regime. Julia pleaded with the minister not to arrest her parents if they left the embassy and quietly returned home, forsaking all further political activity.

“Forget it,” responded Serrano, “if your family leaves the embassy, we’ll arrest them and send them to El Petén.”⁶⁷

Thus admonished, Julia knew that her parents’ only option was to remain inside the Argentine Embassy and hope for safe conduct out of the country. Adan Serrano had a son named Jorge who would be president of Guatemala in 1992, when Maritza disappeared in Guatemala City.

In a list of suspected Communists, written in English and most probably circulated by the U.S. Embassy to the diplomatic missions where the Arbencistas had taken refuge, Ester de Urrutia was described as “Secretary for Peasant Affairs AFG (Communist-front women’s organization).”⁶⁸ CIA Director Allen Dulles wanted the embassies to turn the refugees over to the junta since their crimes allegedly included “murder, torture and thievery while in power.” The Guatemalan courts should prosecute these criminals. Dulles recommended that the junta limit its arrests to “hard core commies and sympathizers against whom criminal charges can be legally and clearly drawn. Incidentally,” Dulles noted, “such charges should be quickly formulated in [the] most important cases to provide [a] legal basis.”⁶⁹

Colonel Castillo Armas was no stranger to exile, and he once benefited from the Latin American custom that embassy asylum and safe conduct passes were fair resolutions to political conflicts. So he resisted the pressures from the U.S. government. Castillo Armas eventually granted safe conduct passes to several hundred Arbencistas, and after three months of waiting, the Argentines finally flew nearly two hundred Guatemalan refugees, including Ester de Urrutia, her husband, and five of their seven children, as well as spouses and grandchildren, twenty-two Urrutias in all, to Buenos Aires.⁷⁰ Che Guevara never went to Argentina. Instead he made his way to Mexico, where he befriended a Cuban exile named Fidel Castro.⁷¹

In their first months in Buenos Aires, the Urrutia family was well treated by Juan Perón's right-wing government. General Perón was fiercely nationalistic and adamantly opposed to the U.S. government's interventions in Latin America. So in spite of the leftist politics of many of the refugees, Perón welcomed the Guatemalans as victims of U.S. imperialism. Adjustment to life in exile, however, wasn't easy. "My very dear daughter," wrote Ester to Julia on November 11, 1954:

I hope that when you receive this, you'll be in good health and in union with your husband, little daughters, and your brother. . . . Until now, we haven't suffered anything, thanks to the government of Mr. President Perón, which for the past four months has given us everything in its power. We're still in the Immigrants' Hotel. We knew that the time limit in the hotel was one month, but since they've seen that we haven't found a place to lodge us, they haven't told us to move out. What saved us are the children; Argentina is for children and for them they find everything and we've been able to obtain everything.

Nevertheless, Ester noted that not all of the Guatemalan refugees acknowledged their debt to the Argentines:

But as always, some people are ingrates and unappreciative. Many of those who arrived on the first flight behaved very badly. They got drunk and committed abuses and censurable acts in order to spoil things for those of us who came with the intent of working in Argentina. Who knows if the government will throw them out of the country and we hope it does since without these people maybe we can regain the confidence of the authorities. Thus, we are suffering the consequences of their behavior (all members of PGT). You know that the just pay for the sinners.

In spite of the generosity of the Argentine government, money was tight for the Urrutia family. But they never lost their faith:

Everything is a question of money, which the working class like us has the least of. In the end, God is everywhere and He's closest to those who suffer, and that's why we're calm. You know that we'll never deny anything, nor will we regret what we do. Thanks to our parents, who formed our characters, we're determined, and that's how we want you to be in the struggle for life.

For the men of the family, there was an interminable search for regular employment:

With respect to work, the only one who's working is [your brother] Héctor. Maybe your father, Miguel, and Edmundo will work next week in a publishing house where the three of them have been promised work. But if not, they'll find something on their own; they'll work somewhere else. There's a lot of work, yes there is, as laborers, but they earn more than office workers. Almost all of the big shots who came with pretensions of being intellectuals are factory helpers, or hod carriers. Here you work; you don't make money easily. Before five in the morning the streets are full of people running to work, like an anthill. The trains, the underground, the trolley buses, the microbuses, the collectives (all big trucks) go loaded with people rushing to work. The truth is when you see this activity, it makes you want to work. . . . There's all kinds of work here for everyone. Only the depraved and the idle don't work.

Of course, when work was over for the day, the exiles thought of their family back home in Guatemala:

At night when your father takes me out for a walk, to window-shop, we think of you a lot. There are some shoes and handbags that are so pretty that you'd go crazy if you saw them. And there's fabrics, blouses and so much that I can't describe it to you. . . .

We never stop thinking of you, not for a moment, and we'd like to have you by our side in order to be complete. You're all part of our lives and we don't lose the hope of telling you [someday] that we have a place to welcome you. But if you have secure work and you're calm, protect it and defend it and economize as much as you can. Because the more you have, the more you're worth.⁷²

In time the Urrutias found a more permanent place to live. All the relatives rented a large house together in Buenos Aires. On Sundays the family socialized with other Guatemalan exiles, cooked Guatemalan dishes, and tried to maintain some sense of community. The leaders of PGT were less fortunate. They were detained in Villa de Voto, an Argentine prison, and treated "a little worse than dogs."⁷³ Fairly soon, Ester began delivering bags of food, clothing, cigarettes, and sweets to her imprisoned compatriots.

But Guatemalans at home were being imprisoned as well. While her husband, Humberto, was in Argentina, Laura Aldana was arrested and jailed three times for allegedly being a Communist. On the third occasion, Laura was held for nearly a month in the women's penitentiary. The conditions in the jail were bad and Laura saw the poor self-esteem of many of the prisoners. The women were not taking care of themselves and their clothes were always dirty. So Laura, true to the spirit of the Women's Alliance, began to organize the other prisoners, encouraging the women to wash their clothes more often, to keep themselves cleaner, and maintain their self-respect. "Revolutionary politics is humanitarian," Laura later explained. Eventually her captors told Laura that "it's better that you go," and she was released.⁷⁴

After Jacobo Árbenz resigned and Colonel Castillo Armas took power, the new dictator convoked a special assembly to "reform" the Guatemalan Constitution. Castillo Armas appointed the most important anti-Communist leaders as delegates to the assembly, including Manuel Orellana and Oscar Conde. Orellana's daughters, Sonia and Sara, attended the inauguration of the assembly, and from a balcony they perused the delegates below them. Sonia had always been an admirer of Conde, but she didn't know what he looked like. "Which one is Oscar Conde?" she asked her sister.

"That skinny black one!" said Sara, pointing to the dark-skinned Conde, as usual in conversation with a number of people. After the inauguration, there was an elegant reception at the National Palace, and Orellana escorted his two daughters and introduced them to Oscar Conde. "How are you?" Conde asked the excited young women. "How do you feel?" Eventually Conde began coming to the house to court Sonia.

Archbishop Mariano Rossell married the couple in Guatemala City's cathedral in August 1955. In December 1956 their first son, Manuel Conde Orellana, was born. When Maritza disappeared in 1992, Manuel Conde led the Guatemalan government's negotiating team engaged in peace talks with Maritza's revolutionary Organización.

Buenos Aires, 1956 Ester de Urrutia and her family had become obsessed by the possibility of returning to Guatemala.⁷⁵ Finally, after two years in exile, President Castillo Armas announced that the refugees could return home.

By that time, Guatemala's wealthy elite had reclaimed most of the land provided by the Árbenz government to five hundred thousand beneficiaries during the agrarian reform program. Ester and Manuel had to sell

their house in order to pay their debts, so they bought a machine for making shoes. For a while they made and sold shoes, but that business failed. Then they sold fish, also without much success. And in the early 1960s they would start a brewery. But that business failed too.

In spite of the financial problems, or perhaps because of them, Ester never strayed from her love of politics and social causes. During the late 1950s Ester organized Guatemala City's market women into small cooperatives, promoting her revolutionary belief that women had to participate in Guatemala's development.⁷⁶ On November 24, 1958, another daughter was born to Ester's son Edmundo and his wife, Pilar. They named her Maritza. It was an auspicious moment to be born in Latin America. The next month, in late December 1958, Fidel Castro led his guerrilla army down from the Sierra Maestra, overthrew the corrupt Batista regime, and launched the Cuban revolution.