

The value of memory

by Carlos Martín Beristain

This two-part article presents a series of reflections on the experience of the Project for the Reconstruction of a Historical Memory in Guatemala (REMHI). This first part analyses the evolution and approach of the project. The second part of this two-part article, which deals with the contents and practical implications of the project report, will be published in the next issue.

There are over 34,000 Guatemalan refugees and some 200,000 people internally displaced. The civil war in Guatemala, which began in the 1960s and reached its peak in the early 1980s, 'reportedly left more than 100,000 dead, an estimated 40,000 'disappeared' and presumed dead, 80,000 widowed, and 200,000 children orphaned.'¹ Human rights violations affected a vast proportion of the population: refugees, internally displaced and those who stayed in their communities.

In 1995, two years before the signing of the peace agreement between the Guatemalan Government and the URNG (Unión Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca), the Archbishop's Office for Human Rights initiated a project to collect testimonies of human rights violations in Guatemala. This project was based on the conviction that the political repression had wiped out the population's power of speech. For many years, survivors and their relatives had been unable to share their experience, come to an understanding about what had happened, or denounce those responsible. The project - REMHI - was initially to provide material for the future Commission for the Clarification of History (Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico - CEH). However, with its underlying mandate to discover the truth and investigate those responsible, REMHI developed into an alternative force complementing what the official

commission (the CEH) was able to do. Various dioceses of the Catholic church took on the role of starting up REMHI and committed themselves to aiding and promoting its work in different districts. The involvement of important sectors of the church was a key aspect in being able to advance the project, given the church's credibility, its geographical

experience of populations affected by war. However, these categories proved inadequate from the start. Which category covers being compelled to kill a brother? Which concept can be applied to public ceremonies where everyone was compelled to beat a victim on the head with a stick until s/he died? The more experiences were shared, experiences which had in many communities been kept secret, the more challenges emerged.

The first of the changes that the project team considered making was in the tools to be used in collecting the testimonies: how to break down into basic elements those experiences - such as military harassment, assassination of specific individuals, massacre, escape to the mountains, and resistance in extreme conditions - which formed part of the daily reality of communities living in some regions; and the long process of displacement, first into the mountains, then from community to community, until finally into exile or displacement in one's own country.

Experience demonstrates that it is amnesia which makes history repeat itself over and over like a bad dream. A good memory allows us to learn from the past, because the only reason for recovering the past is to help us transform our present way of life.

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extension and its ability to turn itself into a 'protected' space. In places where those people holding positions of responsibility in the church were not in favour of the project, it was impossible to collect testimonies and was necessary to establish contact with other social organisations.

Methodology

The research model for the project comprised categories traditionally used in human rights work in the field of collecting, analysing and understanding the

Moreover, focusing on the injuries ran the risk of victimising the survivors. Each account demonstrated an enormous will to survive and to resist, and the testimonies needed to be handled in a way that not only recognised the pain but also rescued the sense of dignity that the violence had tried to suppress.

We eventually arrived at seven questions to be used in collecting the testimonies:

- What happened?
- When?
- Where?

- Who were the people responsible?
- What effect did this event have on people's lives?
- What did they do to face up to the situation?
- Why did they think it happened?

These questions attempted to get to the heart of the experience, referring to the events, people's subjective experience, the consequences of the violence, the active stance taken by the survivors, the significance they placed on the events, and their hopes and demands.

The interviewers came from the same local communities. This gave people confidence but it also brought its own problems, and training² consequently became a key element, involving:

- 1) presentation and explanation of the project
- 2) reasons for a history
- 3) effects of the violence
- 4) facing up to fear
- 5) value of the testimonies
- 6) handling questions in the interview
- 7) problems involved in conducting the interview and
- 8) use of tools and processes of analysis.

The interview process itself took up an important part of the training, from the choice of interviewer to the use of instruments such as tape recorders; this was due not only to the complexity of the task at hand but also to the likelihood of the interview having a strong emotional impact on the victim or the possibility that there might be infiltrators intending to manipulate the interviewers.

But the time for talking had arrived for everybody. Many workshops turned into collective spaces where the interviewers themselves could give their own testimonies, before concentrating on the business of listening to and collecting the testimonies of others.

From the outset the interviewers showed themselves to be aware of the significance of reconstructing history. When asked by individuals and communities why their history was important, they would answer: to understand the truth, to dignify the dead, to recover the power of speech and of social initiative, and to instil the value of memory in future generations. As others in turn expressed interest in how this historical memory could help social reconstruction, the collection of information based on testimonies became enriched by the search for a more communitarian aim in our work and in giving support to the survivors. It rapidly became clear that the direct involvement of the people affected and those social groups closest to them was important, both for their understanding of the situation and for their capability of mobilising communities.

The movement of memory

Memory moves in its own time and the forms of collective mobilisation that took place were different. In some places, people came forward immediately to give their testimonies; in others, months went by. Once started the process took between four and six months. In some places, it was individuals who testified; in others, whole groups

presented a collective testimony. During the period of collecting testimonies, there were follow-up activities, such as workshops, meetings and celebrations, which were seen as an important means of complementing the process.

Voices

The recording of testimonies was a crucial aspect of the following phase of analysis and documentation of the violations, despite the practical problem of engendering reluctance in communication and the possibility of individuals being put at risk. The recording and later transcription of the testimonies guaranteed the reliability of the analysis and constituted a treasure trove of people's voices, available for use in future investigations and as teaching material

Based on a preliminary listening of fifty testimonies, the project team began to put together a thesaurus of the categories of effects, forms of confrontation, causes and interpretations which arose. This work involved its own complex dynamic in selecting and training a group of codifiers: people skilled at listening, transcribing and identifying the different aspects of the thesaurus that was being compiled. Experience showed that the work done by these codifiers in discussing and evaluating the cases was of the utmost importance and that they became an extremely valuable source of information for those responsible for the analysis.

Knowing the victims and the atrocities they had suffered had a big impact on many of those working on the testimonies, especially those who had also suffered traumatic experiences such as losing family members or being tortured. Promoting organisational changes and generating a dynamic of mutual support among members of the project group itself were crucial in helping them confront the problems of heavy workloads and emotional stress.

Value and limitations of the testimonies

The value and limitations of using testimonies in constructing experience and history have been primarily investigated by those involved in oral history and social psychology.³ Among those factors that were important for assessing the value of the testimonies were:

- 1) the time that had elapsed since the events had occurred,

photograph: Carlos Puig



- 2) the traumatic effect of the violence and its possible impact on the ability to focus the memory,
- 3) the possible evaluation of the violence by the interviewer or of political involvement (such as the difficulty of admitting any relationship to the guerrillas in a situation that was still unstable),
- 4) the memory's own processes (simplification; exaggeration of certain events; giving a conventional version according to present demands) leading to the possible use of stereotypes, and
- 5) the individual culture, especially the concept of time being circular (a chain of events, for example) or of particular forms of expression (such as 'the time of violence').

Given the implications of the above and the existence of some obvious limitations, the project team decided to complement its methodology with the use of: secondary sources, especially research based on newspapers and other forms of written material; an analysis of the local context of many of the communities; studies of specific cases related to particular events or periods; interviews with key informants; and testimonies from those associated with the violence.

The significance of memory

One of the main motives for those victims and their relatives who came to give their testimonies was to reveal the truth. The implicit desire to restore their sense of dignity was intimately related to the recognition of the injustice of the events: "they treated us worse than animals."

Also among the frequent reasons for wanting to testify was the possibility of investigating the whereabouts of relatives and of exhumations. Mayan culture considers the dead as a part of the community in possession of another form of life. For this reason, the reinterments constituted for many people a possible way of re-establishing links which had been destroyed by the violence. For all of them, both Ladinos ('half-breed') and Mayas, knowing what had happened to their relatives and having a place where they could go and watch over them was related to being able to bring to a close the process of grief. Underlying many of their queries were not only psychological problems but also practical questions

such as inheritance rights or land ownership. Many other people came to give their testimony in order to demand justice and to punish those responsible, who on many occasions were people well known in the community.

Also underlining both people's expectations and the commitment expressed by the REMHI project is the importance of returning the collective memory. Many people who gave their testimony felt that the search for truth should not end with the writing of a report but rather that it was necessary to aid the process of social reconstruction by producing materials, creating ceremonies and so on. For this reason, the REMHI project is preparing a process based on three premises: that the events should be recorded in a form that is shared by all and be expressed in rituals and shrines; that this 'return process' should be used to explain and clarify what happened as far as possible, with lessons learnt and conclusions extracted for the present; and that this should not involve recreating the horror or stigmatising the survivors but rather should emphasise the positive aspects related to the dignity of the victims and the collective identity.

The analysis of the rich and painful experience undergone by the people who gave their testimonies and the memory of the atrocities which together make up the REMHI Report constitute the foundation of this work to return the collective memory to communities torn apart by violence and displacement.

Carlos Martin Beristain, a member of the REMHI project team, is a doctor specialising in mental health and in work with displaced populations in Guatemala and other Latin American countries. The REMHI Report has been prepared in collaboration with other Guatemalan writers and organisations.

1 *World Refugee Survey 1997*, US Committee for Refugees, p234,

2 Materials used included the methodological design of the training workshops, a manual for interviewers, and a guide for running workshops. These are available from: Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, 6a calle 7-77 Zona 1, Guatemala City, Guatemala. Tel: 00 502 232 4604. Email: odhagua@pronet.net.gt Website: www.guateconnect.com/odhagua

3 Thompson P *The Voice of the Past* Oxford University Press, 1978; Halbwachs M *La Memoire Collective* Paris PUF, 1950

This article is dedicated to the memory of Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera.



Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera, born 27 December 1922; died 26 April 1998.

Juan Gerardi was the coordinator of the Archbishop's Office for Human Rights and a driving force behind the Project for the Reconstruction of a Historical Memory in Guatemala (REMHI).

He was assassinated on the evening of Sunday 26 April 1998, two days after presiding over the launch of *Guatemala: Never Again: the report of the REMHI project findings*. At the launch, Bishop Gerardi acknowledged the risks of peace-building: "We want to contribute to the building of a new and different country. The building of the kingdom of the Lord is risky, and the builders of it are only those who have enough strength to confront the risks."