

Flight to Freedom

The Story of Central American Refugees in California



EDITED BY

Rossana Pérez

with Henry A. J. Ramos



“... This history offers what no academic treatment of the subject can: passion and the wisdom of experience.”

—Roberto Lovato, New America Media

“Told in the voice of the ‘voiceless’ ... *Flight to Freedom* brings alive an epic human journey. ... This book teaches us important lessons about community organizing and empowerment, and the capacity of the human spirit to endure and prevail.”

—Michele Prichard, Director of Change Initiatives,
Liberty Hill Foundation, Los Angeles

“This is an important story that must be told. ... *Flight to Freedom* documents the impressive community-building efforts of the Salvadoran community to gain freedom and have a strong presence in their new adopted land. In Los Angeles they now represent a vibrant segment of the local populace and their contribution to this nation continues to evolve and will surely reinforce the multicultural strength that is the foundation of the United States.”

—Ed P. Reyes, Los Angeles City Councilman

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English translation by Carolina Villarroel



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*For Sara, Tonatiuh and Sage.
They are the light of the future.*

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Preface

As I reflect on the stories of the eight participants featured in the anthology that follows, I recall when I started to think about writing a book about Salvadorans in California. It was the summer of 2004. I was persuaded that there were many powerful yet untold stories residing among the various Salvadoran community leaders around the state of California. I felt strongly that if these stories could somehow be made public it would greatly increase appreciation of our community's many contributions to American civic culture. To gain support for my idea, I reached out to Roberto Lovato, the former executive director of CARECEN, Los Angeles's leading Central American community advocacy organization. Roberto responded enthusiastically to my idea. He even shared with me his own long-held desire to put together a book about the emerging Salvadoran American population, which he agreed had been grossly under-chronicled in books written about the violence and unrest that rocked El Salvador and brought over a million refugees to California and other states in the 1980s. Roberto, now a contributing editor with New America Media in New York, confirmed my conviction that a book about the Salvadoran American community's recent experiences in the United States would be an important addition to the public record.

By October we had scheduled a meeting to discuss further the prospects of producing a first voice book about Salvadorans in the United States with Henry A. J. Ramos, editor of the Arte Público Press Hispanic Civil Rights Series, and Carlos Vaquerano, another former CARECEN executive who is now running the Salvadoran American Leadership Education Fund (SALEF). They both liked the idea and Henry asked me to send him something in writing at my earliest convenience. He also designated me as the project principal to develop and complete a set of interviews with leading Salvadorans who had been among the first generation of refugees to leave El Salvador in search of a better life in California. By December we had put togeth-

er a project proposal, for which Henry helped us to gain approval and funding through Arte Público Press under the direction of Dr. Nicolás Kanellos at the University of Houston.

With the project approved, I began 2005 working hard to develop a list of prospective interviewees and a questionnaire, which I shared with different people in the community for input. Using a standard question set was intended to facilitate the flow of the interviews conducted and to logically inform the book's contents. Of course, by definition, the stories are different by virtue of the interviewees' variations in age, geographical origins in El Salvador and diverse dates of arrival in the United States. But the use of a common question set enabled us finally to weave together commonalities in perspective on the Salvadoran experience in California that lift up shared lessons for all of us to consider when reflecting upon the larger context that informed their flight to the United States—their flight to freedom.

During the first months of 2005, I completed agreements with seven other individuals to complete interviews for the anthology. This was an extraordinary process. To begin, I made a conscious decision to select people who were pioneers in forming California's leading Central American community organizations, particularly during the early years, in the 1980s. In selecting interview subjects, moreover, I wanted to highlight individuals who continued to work in the community at some level. Carlos Vaquerano suggested early on that we should talk to several leaders from San Francisco: Carmen Alegría, Alicia Mendoza and Ramón Cardona. Following Carlos' instincts, we flew up together from Los Angeles on a weekend in early March and met with these leading Salvadoran community advocates at a Mexican restaurant in Oakland. After a couple of hours, we all agreed that I would come back soon to formally interview them for the book.

By mid-April, I was back in the Bay Area. I drove to Palo Alto to interview Carmen. The next day, I drove to Concord to interview Alicia. I ended my trip interviewing Ramón in Oakland. The stories and experiences recounted were rich and poignant, both individually and collectively. In each case, drawing on our standard question set, I used a cassette tape recorder to capture verbatim the respondents' comments and insights related to the major topics and themes I wanted to cover. Broadly stated, the essential content I wanted them to speak to included their

history in El Salvador, the circumstances that had politicized them and brought them to California, their early and continuing involvements in civic organizations here in the United States, the lessons of their experiences to date and their hopes and dreams for the future.

A similar process informed the book's development in Southern California. I contacted potential contributors and asked if they would consider contributing to the anthology. In virtually every case, the individuals I approached agreed to contribute by telling their stories: Isabel Beltrán, Javier Huete, Eduardo González and, of course, Carlos Vaquerano. My own story is also included here as one of the eight featured entries. Because I was centrally involved in the work highlighted throughout the book, and in order to ensure that my experiences too could help educate and inform the broader public about the Salvadoran community's recent experiences in California, I felt it important to contribute as well.

While securing interviews for the book was surprisingly easy as a logistical matter, it was emotionally difficult. At every step along the way, I was reminded that numerous leaders who had played instrumental roles in our formation as a community in California some twenty-five years ago had since either returned to El Salvador, migrated to other places or passed away. Reflecting back on their passages with those of us who remain in California was humbling and bitter-sweet. Many of these people had been instrumental in and even essential to our struggle. It was hard for me not to become particularly emotional thinking about the larger losses that had marked the generation of which we had all emerged in El Salvador. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the U.S.-backed war in our country left more than 80,000 people dead and more than 9,000 individuals "disappeared."

Given all that our community has experienced as a result of being ripped in and from our homeland more than a generation ago, the completion of this anthology is a dream come true. This is especially the case for those of us who have lived on the front edge of resistance and reformation relative to El Salvador's national policies and American engagement in the region. I remember that during the solidarity and sanctuary years of the 1980s we always talked about documenting history in the making, but at that time we had too much work in front of us to do so. For virtually all of us, there were endless meetings and

actions intended to stop the war in our country. There were many sleepless nights, many obstacles to overcome. At the same time, we were all desperately trying to find a legal safe haven in the United States—something that U.S. policy of the day made almost impossible.

Notwithstanding the many hardships we have faced as a community in recent decades, we have found a way to thrive and evolve. Although the California Salvadoran community is a fairly new participant in U.S. civic life, its contributions to California and the nation's political, social and economic advancement have been enormous. There are now over 1 million Salvadorans residing in California and the Salvadoran community's leadership includes important political figures like former California state senator Liz Figueroa, as well as noted journalists such as Ruben Martínez and entertainers like Efran Ramírez. In addition, California, now home to some 60 percent of the U.S. Salvadoran population, produces billions of dollars in national consumer and tax revenue from Salvadorans and over \$1 billion in annual direct aid to El Salvador through private family remittances.

This book is an attempt to compile and share the first person stories of leaders who helped to form the anchor organizations that provided, and through the years continued to provide, support to the California Salvadoran community. The variety of insights they have to share reflects the diversity of the community at large. Their common thread is the desire for a better society and the shared sense of need to work, accordingly, for social justice.

The stories featured here principally relate to individual experiences in a country in turmoil. The contributors share how each of us and our families were affected by civil war in El Salvador—a conflict that lasted for more than a decade. As we tell our stories, memories of a deeply divided country and fragmented families surface: fragmented both by competing ideologies and by the distances that increasingly separated us as many fled to the United States in search of a better life while others stayed behind. All of these past realities clearly remain fresh in our memories as lasting legacies of the war.

Flight to Freedom serves as a collective testament—a testament to the power of people to seek and make change. After the Peace Agreements took place in El Salvador in the early 1990s, leading Salvadoran community organizations in the United States had to redirect their work

efforts in order to better respond to the new realities of community members who had chosen to make their lives here in this country. For a variety of reasons, most of the Salvadorans who came to the United States to flee war and political persecution decided to remain here when the Salvadoran conflict ended. Many are considered still to be illegal U.S. residents despite having laid strong roots and allegiances in America. The issue of immigration is thus still unresolved. Over the years, there have been different amnesty programs offered, yet all of these have somehow contained major loopholes that have locked Salvadorans and others out of the possibility of obtaining permanent residency.

Despite the continuing hurdles, Salvadorans in California and elsewhere have continued to build and to fight for their survival. The Caja de Crédito (a people's credit union and economic development corporation) was formed in 1997, based on the community's need for supportive economic development. The need to educate people about civic participation through the work of groups like SALEF, and to encourage higher education for the next generations, have become priorities in order to ensure our increased representation and progress in key aspects of U.S. life. In this connection, the nation's first Central American Studies Program was created in 1999 at California State University at Northridge (CSUN). Like this book, the Program serves the need to educate younger Salvadoran Americans—and others—about our history, as well as to prepare them for important future leadership roles in our community and in the larger culture, through the benefit of a more informed understanding of who we are.

As we enter the twenty first century, our communities both in El Salvador and in the United States still have a lot of unfinished business to face from the war period. Until now, those responsible for many of the massacres and political crimes that took place have not been brought to justice. But neither the Salvadoran community nor the larger American family can live much longer in denial of this history. Our history needs to be acknowledged and a healing process through dialogue should take place. Silence will not change the legacy of destruction and horror that we witnessed; revisiting that history openly and honestly is the only way that we can assure it will not happen again.

Fifteen years after the Peace Agreements there is still not a solution in sight to address increasing poverty in El Salvador. Official ter-

ror perpetrated by the state has mutated into organized crime and gang violence throughout the country. The more than \$1 billion in annual remittances sent by U.S.-based Salvadorans are increasingly depended on to support the core economy of the country. Due to the resulting lack of job opportunities, the remaining Salvadorans back home are increasingly immigrating to the United States with the hope of finding economic opportunity. But in the current anti-immigrant environment that characterizes contemporary U.S. public discourse, the American Dream is becoming more and more difficult for these newcomers to achieve since they lack the proper documentation to work.

We are a transnational community; whatever happens in El Salvador affects us here in the United States and vice versa. The stories that make up this book highlight this reality. Through them we connect to history, to the collective memory of our community, the memory of our past, the memory of our pain, the memory that keeps us going. We must share this memory with our children because they are the future and it is our responsibility to provide them with the tools of knowledge that give us a better understanding of our identity.

I hope that readers of all kinds will enjoy and learn from *Flight to Freedom*. Its contents may invoke tears and smiles all at once but, considering what is covered, that is appropriately fitting. These are stories of wisdom and courage in the face of unimaginable challenges. These are the testimonies of those who, facing the turmoil of El Salvador at the close of the twentieth century, had the vision and disposition to take flight to freedom in California. It is a long way from the battlefields of our country to the golden state that stands as the gateway to the American Dream. And yet, as you will see in the pages that follow, the recent experiences of Salvadoran Americans have greatly reduced the distance between these seemingly disconnected places. In effect, the Salvadoran American community has irrevocably bound together these otherwise distant and disconnected points on the map; and we have done so in a manner that is fundamentally constructive and inspiring. Surely there is much for all of us to learn from this culmination of experiences and events.

Rossana Pérez
Los Angeles, CA
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