

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Life in El Salvador

Personal Experiences

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TILA DE JIMÉNEZ

Interviewed

by

Patricia Homick

on

March 15, 1981

TILA DE JIMÉNEZ

Tila Elvira Pacheco was born February 9, 1914 in El Salvador. After graduation from Ahuachapán High School, she studied accounting and education at La Providencia College for two years. Tila Pacheco married Flavio Jiménez March 31, 1934, and together they raised a family of six children. Tila operated a boutique and a beauty salon from 1965 to 1974 in the heart of San Salvador, but both shops had to be closed down due to the Civil War. Tila and a daughter were also in business together from 1978 to 1980 as owners of a flower shop known as "Margaritas Del Valle." Tila's interests include oil painting, crafts, flower arranging, and sewing. Her family, as a member of the middle class, has been caught in the midst of the ongoing Civil War in El Salvador; several relatives have become innocent victims.

Patricia Homick
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INTERVIEWEE: TILA DE JIMÉNEZ

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Homick

SUBJECT: terrorist attacks, socioeconomic classes,
leaders of El Salvador, Civil War

DATE: March 15, 1981

H: This is an interview with Tila Jiménez for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on life in El Salvador, on March 15, 1981, by Patty Homick. Tila's daughter, Silvia Hyre, will also be present to assist in the translation.

Let's begin by discussing your family. Can you tell me about your children, your husband's job, your community activities in which you participated?

J: My husband is a professor specializing in mathematics.

H: Where does he teach?

J: He has already retired, but he says that he will never completely retire so he works in a private high school for girls. He also tutors privately at home. Before he used to be director of the school for teachers, which is called the normal school. That is for teachers only. He also taught in public school, high school, and private school.

H: Can you tell me about your sons and daughters?

J: I have six children. The oldest one, Sergio, specializes in computers and works for a company that makes beer, but he works in the department where they only work with computers. He has been married twice; the first time he was a widower and the second time he got married he had four children. He has two girls and two boys.

All of my girls are married now. My second daughter, Angela, is married to an economic engineer. He lives off of his property. She is a teacher at what they call the national

institute, which is an equivalent of high school here. She teaches interior decoration and crafts. She has three children. She is the worst one off with the situation as it is because her husband makes a living off of the land. They have coffee crops and they haven't been able to gain access to the crop early and cut the coffee and deliver it. Before the situation in El Salvador they were the ones better off.

My third child, Argentina, is a secretary and teacher. She is teaching in another national institute in another town close to the capital. She was the former secretary to the president of the national university. Because the university is closed now she lost her job and has gotten another job teaching. She had been working for the university for about nineteen years.

My fourth child, Aida, was also a secretary. She used to work in an office that distributed Volkswagons. Her husband is a lawyer. She used to work while he went to school, but now they don't like to leave the kids in the hands of the maids, so she decided to quit working and stay home.

My fifth child, Ketty, lost her husband last summer. She has four children and she stays home and dedicates herself to her children. Her husband died in a terrorist attack. They don't know whether it came from the left or the right, but they suspect very strongly that it came from the security forces. He couldn't defend himself; they just came in and attacked and he was killed. They just came and opened fire when he was eating at a restaurant with some other friends. It wasn't aimed at a particular person. There were twelve people killed and many hurt. They never really found out all the details about the whole thing. It was a surprise attack and they weren't able to get details because people were afraid. He was also a computer specialist and he worked for the government.

My sixth daughter, Silvia, has lived in the United States for almost twelve years. She married an American and has two children. She attends school [YSU] and plans to graduate soon. She also works at the foreign language lab at the university and is secretary to the curriculum committee of the university. She left El Salvador in July of 1969.

- H: What was your social standing in the community? Were you middle class or upper class?
- J: I am from the middle class which is the class that is suffering the most right now. The lower class are the victims right now.
- H: How did your life style compare to that of a typical citizen of El Salvador?
- J: In the social standing over there there is a big competition among classes. You are admitted to a class depending on what

you have. I am married to a professor and he is middle class too. Normally a family that is middle class and the father is a professor, their kids would be well-educated and the wife too. We have a pretty good life. There is a great distance between the life of a middle class person and a lower class person. The middle class, although it is not the high class, usually teachers teach the girls that belong to the upper class. Normally middle class children are educated together with the upper class in school. The standing of a teacher is even better because the students have the teacher participate in their social activities; they are invited to special things and participate in affairs of the upper class too. The upper class is very small too.

H: Are most of the people in the community where you live middle class people? Are you surrounded by upper class or lower class people?

J: Both classes. The majority where I live is middle class, but there are upper class mixed in.

H: Can you describe the city where you live?

J: Although El Salvador is a very small country the capital is big. It is modern and every day it keeps getting more modern. Even though right now there is a lot of destruction because of what is going on, the bombing and things, they are constantly building. They bomb something and they build it right up; they don't just forget about it. Like every city San Salvador has bad places and good places to live, but the majority of it is beautiful. The best places to live, those with social standing like middle class, they live in what we call colonias. It is not exactly outside the city; it surrounds the city. The houses are all built the same and then people buy them. Depending on how much you have, then you do different things to your house and they look completely different. Even though the situation right now is so bad the city is still beautiful.

H: Is it common for people in your city to have maids?

J: If you can afford it. Right before the revolution started it was getting very difficult to have a maid because industry was growing so people wanted to go and work in a factory. I guess they are paid better or like the job better. However, now people are looking for jobs because a lot of the factories were bombed or destroyed or closed because of the violence. There are a lot of people in need of jobs. Still, they demand a certain amount of money to work. Because the economy is so bad it is getting a little bit more difficult. Not everybody can afford it.

H: Are the maids from lower class or middle class families?

- J: The lower class. They are more like peasants who come from out of town to look for jobs as maids.
- H: How many maids did you have?
- J: I have always preferred to have one, but that one didn't do the laundry or the ironing so I have somebody come once or twice weekly to do the laundry or the ironing.
- H: How do you think the current unrest affects your daily life?
- J: We are always trying to live our life as normal as possible. A lot of times I have errands to run and things to do, but we live in a state of uncertainty. We never know whether we are going to be able to do something or not. Sometimes I have to go to the post office or store and I never know if I should or shouldn't go. A lot of times there are rumors that there are things that are going to happen, violence. In a lot of cases you have to just venture and do it because you never know if you are going to come back. You go out and you never know if something is going to happen. A lot of times I go out and there are confrontations between guerrillas and the police or National Guard or whatever. The way the guerrillas attack, they attack from three to five minutes at the most and then they run away. By the time the police come they just open fire and a lot of innocent people get killed. If you are a bystander or just happen to be there they don't ask whether you are a guerrilla they just shoot. If you are there that is tough luck.
- H: Have you witnessed any such guerrilla attacks?
- J: No, because I hide. I have been in attacks but all I have done is thrown myself to the floor and hope nothing happened to me. You don't see these things because you are just taking care of yourself.
- H: Why did you come to the United States?
- J: Basically I came here because Silvia needs me. We are uncertain about our situation so she is uncertain. We are supposed to know what is going on, but we don't really know all the details. My husband has encouraged me to come, if not for safety for health reasons, rest.
- H: How long do you plan to stay here?
- J: At the beginning I was planning for three months, but this has gone by already. I came in November. No matter what, I plan on going back because all my family is down there and my husband. I plan to stay now until August or September. I hope the situation will improve, but if it doesn't I still will go back.

- H: Does your husband write letters or call often to let you know he is safe and discuss the latest news about events back home?
- J: We write often. I get letters from him and my children and they call also. I have been getting a letter a month and there are some that get lost. We don't discuss the political situation in detail because it is a very delicate situation. You cannot talk about that on detail on the phone. We never go into details for fear of the government getting back at us. Right now because of the situation the way it is they open a lot of the mail. If you say something that you shouldn't say or they don't like it, you're running the chance of . . .
- H: How accurate do you feel the newspapers, magazines, and television in El Salvador were with regard to reporting about the Civil War?
- J: According to the Salvadonian press everything is normal; nothing is going on. It seems that the government has it completely controlled. You are not allowed to report anything unusual. If they do happen to report an attack, of course they are the ones that are always winning. Normally a newspaper has the normal advertisements and all that kind of normal things; there is nothing unusual. At the beginning there was a photographer for television that used to shoot all the confrontations with the police and guerrillas. He would shoot all this kind of thing, but pretty soon the government didn't think too much of that and he had to cut it out. There is only one newspaper that is underground; that one tells everything the way it is. They are constantly bombing the places where this newspaper is located. Obviously the man who owns it is smart and keeps moving it. By the time they bomb it he is gone.
- H: Were you ever able to obtain copies of this underground newspaper?
- J: A lot of the people that sell these things are selling the normal newspaper. They are very careful about asking you if you want the other one too and they stick it in between the regular newspaper and sell it to you. It doesn't even look like a regular newspaper. The printing looks like a newspaper, but usually it is like clippings and they staple it on the top. They call it the Independence.
- H: Jean Kirkpatrick has said, "The violence in El Salvador was not caused by social injustice, but because injustice has existed for decades, but by the introduction of arms from the outside." What do you feel about this statement?
- J: I don't agree with that. Social injustice is what has caused it. The lower class is tired of being the victim all of these years. The inequality is just so much. It has come to a climax now. They saw this coming for a long time. The lower class

wants to share in what all those fourteen families have, what all those famous, fourteen families have. They want property, something to eat, all those human rights, and the right to an education. So far education hasn't been one of the high priorities down there. Some new reforms are starting now, but this cannot be done right now because of the violence. You cannot get used to social injustice. People did not get used to that, they became aware. I guess the middle class did realize that this was happening.

H: In addition to the unfair distribution of land, what other injustices have you noticed in your country?

J: This class lacks everything; I cannot tell you one by one. They don't have anything there. They are destitute. I don't think it is right to claim it by force, but what can they do.

H: Does your family own land?

J: I own houses, rent them, but not a whole bunch of them. My daughters have property too.

H: Why is the upper class so unwilling to give up some of its wealth in order to preserve the country? After all, if the Civil War continues they may lose not just some of their wealth but all of it.

J: The upper and middle classes, what they want is power. Of course, if they have all that they have power, so they don't want to give in because maybe their power would decrease. I only wish that the lower class had been guided in a more wise way. The country in itself right now, instead of having taken a step forward they have taken a step and a half back. For my class, the ideology that the guerrillas have, if they win it is going to be fatal for my class.

H: Do you see land reform as a solution to the country's problems? In America we always hear so much about the land problems in El Salvador.

J: Partially it is a solution. I think that this could help partially, but what I notice is that the extreme right and left of both sides want power. That is a problem. Both sides want power, and when the middle class saw these reforms happening they thought that was good; they liked it. The poor people are ignorant, so they have different ideas. I don't exactly know what they want. The upper class was very furious about this while the middle class was happy.

H: How influential do you feel the Catholic church was in your country?

J: The government blames the Catholic church for the whole thing

that is going on right now. They are the ones that made people aware of these conditions. Even now they are the only press they have to know what is going on. The sermon in church usually broadcasts it. The archbishop that was killed, he would come in at 12:00 and he would say exactly how many people were killed, what had happened, everything. The church wouldn't favor either side, but they would say it the way it happened.

- H: Now that even members of the religious community are becoming victims of the guerrillas, has the role of the Catholic church changed at all?
- J: The church hasn't changed; they aren't afraid. They are still doing it the way they were doing it at the beginning. I believe there were between twenty and thirty priests killed down there.
- H: How do the common citizens react to the senseless murders of priests and nuns?
- J: The common citizens are amazed about this and can't believe they actually touch the church that way, but at the same time they fear. Although you are so afraid you still talk about it, but you know it's a subject you are not supposed to talk about.
- H: It is claimed that President Duarte is a mere figurehead. What is your impression of this?
- J: I believe so far he has only been a puppet, but that could change if the United States intervenes to assure the people. I think he could do really good things for the country, but he cannot right now because he doesn't have the power. I believe if he is backed by the government of the United States, if the United States makes sure that he is the one that has the power, it could be very good. So far we're observing right now.
- H: Do most people like him?
- J: Yes, he is very loved by the people. The people really like him. As a matter of fact, since it got really bad a few years ago when they elected Romero, he wasn't elected; Duarte was elected. He was running for president and he won it by an absolute majority. Of course, the militia couldn't allow for him to be the president so they tortured him and did all kinds of things until he went into exile. Before this time he had been the mayor of San Salvador for three terms. People really liked him because he did a lot of good for the poor people and people in general. He did a lot of good things for the whole country. People are skeptical right now because they believe that although he is the president he is not the one who is carrying the ball; he is not the one that has the power. They do like his ideology. He has a lot of charisma. He is a very educated person and has a great personality.

H: What type of political system do you favor for your country?

J: Like the United States, Democratic.

H: What is the attitude of most people in your country? Do they feel the same way?

J: Yes, the middle class.

H: What about the other classes?

J: We had a dictator for fifteen years, way back. It was 1930 or something. He was a military man. He was in power for thirteen years and he is the one that started attacking the Communist idea. The government right now, they only suspect someone of having what they call Communism, because a lot of times you might have an idea of social reform. It is not necessarily Communism, but for them it is. Anything that opposes what they believe in is Communism. In those years he would kill everybody suspected of being a Communist. Among them there were a lot of peasants. So there is a lot of resentment from way back. It is reinforced by the ideology that the guerrillas have right now. They don't want a government like the United States; they probably want a Marxist or a more towards the extreme left type of government, the lower class that is. I suspect this is the way it is.

H: Do you think there is any hope for your country to be a democracy?

J: I really don't know. We will have to wait and see. I am pretty sure this is going to take a very, long time, especially because the people on both sides are fighting. The extreme left doesn't believe it is defeated and they aren't going to accept being defeated. They are going to fight it to the end. They are going to fight and go to the extremes that they have to go to in order to obtain what they want.

H: What is the general attitude towards Americans in your country?

J: There is more than one opinion because of the class division. They are uncertain about the United States too. If there weren't people giving guns to the guerillas, obviously the guns would be all gone and the fighting would stop. They think that if the United States is supplying guns to the government then the left will supply a little bit more to the left side and the whole thing is going to start all over and they are going to keep on killing each other. I don't want the United States to give to the military so that the military can do whatever they want. I want somebody else to have control of things. Obviously the middle class doesn't want anything to do with Communism. They don't oppose the reform, but they don't want the extreme left.

- H: As long as Duarte is receiving the support of the United States the people don't mind?
- J: Middle class people think the same way I do; as long as the government here makes sure that Duarte is the one who has the power, then it would be alright for them, but if they don't then it is not. I don't mean that they shouldn't assist the military; that is part of every country's government or structure.
- H: Do you have any idea how the lower class people would feel about the United States aid?
- J: They hate it. (Laughter) I am happy about it. I am concerned about the whole country, but I am looking at what is good for everybody, not just my class or the lower class. All these years everybody has known that Duarte is a humanist too and that he wouldn't let these people down, perhaps even to the extreme reforms that the extreme left wants, but there would be some reform.
- In a letter that I received from my husband yesterday he said that there have been some educational reforms so that education is available to everybody. The government is building schools and making sure that everybody has a school available that is close by.
- H: Don't you think perhaps that it is a little late to be instituting such reform? Can the people be appeased at this late date?
- J: People aren't as enstomred as we think, the average middle-class citizen. They are tired of this violence; they are tired of not being able to do everything in a normal way. Perhaps they aren't going to get everything they want. If they see that there is something done about it they are going to settle for it. I don't think the guerrillas will settle for anything less than what they want.
- H: Most people were happy with the new reforms. Is there any way, do you think, the government would be able to control the guerrillas? Will they be continually disrupting the peace?
- J: I find it very difficult to believe that because even if they see that they are defeated they are going to go to the end because what they believe in is so ingrained.
- H: Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't talked about?
- J: You may realize politicalwise I am not involved in anything. I am suffering the consequence of what is going on. This is just a view of somebody that is living through this and hoping

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things will get better.

H: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW