

# THE ATROCITY FILES

Deciphering the archives of Guatemala's dirty war

By *Kate Doyle*

When Guatemala's thirty-six-year civil war ended, in 1996, the country was a vast unmarked grave. More than 200,000 people had died or disappeared in the conflict, most of them unarmed civilians. A truth commission established by the peace accords, the Historical Clarification Commission, opened its doors in 1997 and began digging up corpses around the country. Teams of interviewers fanned out, visiting remote villages to collect firsthand accounts of massacres, rape, torture, and abductions. Victims talked and talked; the state remained silent. The commission sent letters to the defense and interior ministries seeking information about the operations of security forces during the war. They wanted documents: policy papers, plans, orders, intelligence, operational reports, after-action memos. They received almost nothing. The military and the police stonewalled the investigations, and the government backed them. Guatemalan officials, the commission was told, did not document their daily business as did officials in other, more developed countries. It became an article of faith that any pa-

per generated by the regime did not survive the war.

And why, after all, would there be records? In the cities, security forces had sought to dismember guerrilla networks with maximum deniability. Death squads operated out of uniform, in unmarked vehicles, and the newspapers played along, reporting each fresh corpse as the work of "unidentified men in civilian clothing." Anonymous killers did their best to strip their victims' identities, crushing faces and hacking off hands. Or they kidnapped them and threw the bodies into the oblivion of gullies, lakes, and mass graves.

In 2005, however, the government's silence was shattered. That May, residents of a crowded working-class neighborhood in Guatemala City sent a complaint to the country's human-rights prosecutor, Sergio Morales Alvarado, about the improper storage of explosives on a local police base. The prosecutor's first request to authorities for removal of the grenades, ammunition, homemade bombs, mortar shells, and sacks of potassium chlorate seized over years of police raids was ignored. But after a freak explosion on a nearby military base made headlines a few weeks later, the National Civil Police agreed to transfer the weapons off-site. On

July 5, Morales sent a team of inspectors to verify the removal, and it was during that visit that they stumbled upon an archive of the Guatemalan National Police. The former National Police, that is—an institution so entirely complicit in the atrocities of the civil war that it was considered irredeemable and disbanded in 1997. Morales immediately obtained a judge's order granting him unrestricted access to the records to search for evidence of human-rights abuses.

"The day we went to the archive after getting the judge's order," said Carla Villagrán, a senior staff member in the prosecutor's office, "we opened up one of the file cabinets in the first room we entered. And there were dozens of folders marked with the names of some of the most famous cases of political assassination in Guatemala." Among them were files on Mario López Larraive (a labor attorney and a popular law professor at the national university, killed by machine-gun fire as he left his office on June 8, 1977); Manuel Colom Argueta (one of Guatemala's most promising opposition politicians, murdered on March 22, 1979, a week after registering his new political party); and Myrna Mack (a young anthropologist who worked with Mayan massacre survivors and was stabbed to

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Photographs gathered from the floor of the National Police Archive shortly after it was discovered in 2005. Photograph by Daniel Hernández-Salazar





death in downtown Guatemala City on September 11, 1990). "And when we opened the folders, we found not only routine police reports, but all kinds of things," Carla said. "Details about surveillance operations targeting them before they were killed, for example." López Larrave's file included a typed page listing twelve names; his was crossed out in ink. Of the twelve, nine were people assassinated or abducted during the late 1970s for suspected subversion.

The appearance of the archive was a huge story in Guatemala, though the government attempted to play down the discovery. "Of course we have records," said Interior Minister Carlos Vielmann. "We are the police!"

Two and a half years later, the human-rights prosecutor's office is just completing its report on the archive. The report's publication, set

for early 2008, will come just as the new president takes office, after a particularly tense runoff campaign. Both candidates conjure up memories of the civil war: one is the nephew of the murdered Manuel Colom Argueta, Alvaro Colom Caballeros, a businessman whose centrist party has been tainted by corruption scandals; the other is Otto Pérez Molina, a retired general and former chief of military intelligence, whose campaign slogan is *mano dura*, "hard hand."

**F**ew Guatemalans were untouched by the war. Carla Villagrán grew up in Guatemala City, the fourth of five children in a comfortable middle-class household; her father, a prominent economist and onetime member of the Guatemalan equivalent of the Federal Reserve Board, was an

associate of Manuel Colom Argueta. Carla, who is forty-three and married with three children, was nineteen years old when her first husband was kidnapped, in 1984. His disappearance was part of a wave of abductions set into motion by the military regime of General Oscar Humberto Mejía Víctores in the early 1980s, after the scorched-earth strategy of his predecessor, General José Efraín Ríos Montt, had run its course. Army massacres across the country had destroyed hundreds of predominantly Mayan villages and were followed by an urban campaign aimed at capturing and killing the insurgent leadership. Carla's husband was among those targeted; his kidnapping is described in declassified U.S. documents that I obtained in the course of my work for the National Security Archive.





In a cable sent by the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala to Washington, then-Ambassador Frederic Chapin recounted what happened: “On February 1, 1984, Héctor Villagrán Salazar came to the Embassy to report the January 27 abduction of son-in-law Jorge Mauricio Gatica Paz. According to Mr. Villagrán, his daughter and son-in-law went to a large shopping center to do some grocery shopping on January 27. Mr. Gatica remained in the car with the dog while his wife went into the supermarket. When she came out of the store, car, husband and dog had disappeared. A witness told her that heavily armed men in a white panel truck pulled up behind her car, forced her husband into the truck, and departed rapidly in both vehicles. Although there were several policemen in the parking lot—the

shopping center is one of the largest in Guatemala City—they did not intervene and would not tell the wife anything.”

I arrived in Guatemala five weeks after the archive was discovered. Traffic being what it is in Guatemala City, it was midmorning by the time we pulled up to the gates of the police base. The van from the prosecutor’s office had inched its way across town, from the city’s historic center to the teeming residential zone, through outdoor markets, past herds of goats, and around diesel-belching buses, to make a journey of three kilometers in about forty minutes. Now we idled before the walls of a vast local outpost of the National Civil Police until a guard waved us through with an indifferent flap of his hand.

Carla weaved expertly around the rusted shells of abandoned vehicles stacked two stories high, with one hand on the wheel and her cell phone against her ear in the other. Our car heaved over the broken ground until we reached the entrance to a cluster of low buildings at the edge of the compound. As we unsnapped seat belts and gathered our bags we could hear the agitated barking of police dogs caged nearby. We opened the doors and tumbled out into a cool, gray morning, staring up at the narrow windows facing the courtyard. We could already see the paper through the cracked glass. Carla grinned as she handed me a pair of rubber gloves. “Are you ready?”

I entered a warren of pitch-black rabbit holes, corridors that led nowhere, dripping ceilings, broken lights hanging from frayed wires, and ominous stains underfoot. Women em-

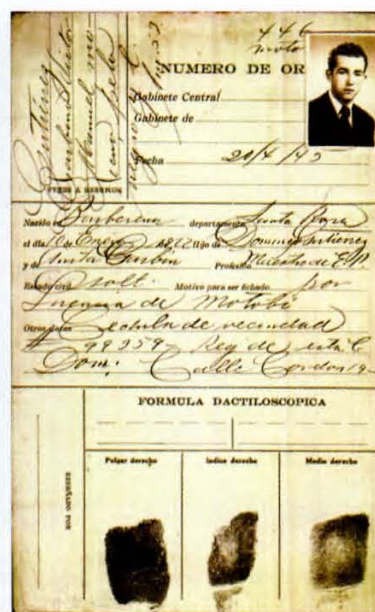


ployees of the police who worked as records administrators greeted us in a small antechamber and then led us into the first room. On every available centimeter of the cement floor there were towers of mildewed paper and file folders, tied in twine and entombed in grit. The paper was decomposing before our eyes—wet paper and rotting paper, charred paper, paper brown with mold, paper becoming compost with small seedlings growing through it. We stumbled from one damp cavern to the next, skirting rusted file cabinets and the sharp edges of old license plates littering the floors. The stench of decay was overpowering; all around us were

lies at the edge of Guatemala City. Finding bodies and failing to identify them was evidently a central preoccupation for the National Police; there were scores of photographed corpses, men and women memorialized as battered faces black with blood or swarming with maggots, each labeled with the same name: “desconocido,” “unknown.” There was a picture of an amputated left hand, “owner unknown,” a bloated corpse stuffed in the trunk of a car. Then there were the snapshots of a few soon-to-be-unknown bodies, such as the young man seated with his back to a rough concrete wall in button-down shirt and jeans,

understand: we weren’t prohibited from looking at them, but she still had strict orders, almost ten years after the abolition of the National Police, not to touch.

Carla and I tiptoed up some concrete steps to the second floor of one building. A rooftop terrace looked over the junkyard that inhabited this corner of the base, weeds twisting through what was left of the pavement below. The air was revivifying, though it hung as densely as ever over the city. Back inside, we found a series of tiny windowless spaces, most no wider than a pigeon, with heavy wire netting



insect carcasses and bat droppings, feathers, bird shit, and the nibbling of rats. We breathed the dead air through our flimsy paper masks.

There were five buildings in all. Each building harbored its peculiar secrets. In one, metal file cabinets lined the walls with improvised labels scrawled in black marker across the drawers: “assassinations,” “homicides,” “kidnappings.” In another, we stepped gingerly over haphazard trash heaps, which on closer inspection included thousands of black-and-white photo I.D.’s. The staff was sweeping them into piles and transferring them into clear plastic bags.

I chose a record off the floor at random. It was a 1979 report on three unidentified cadavers found in the gul-

looking at the photographer hopelessly through dark eyes.

As we moved from room to room, the policewomen accompanied us, obligingly yanking open drawers when requested or slipping pages out of bound folders to show us. They balked only once, when we came upon a pile of records from the old Detective Corps, a greatly feared special-operations squad that existed in the 1970s and early ’80s, notorious for its role in the kidnapping, torture, and execution of suspected subversives. We asked the woman in charge to hand us some file folders, but she began shaking her head no and then her finger, shaking it at us, no, no, “No se puede, no se puede,” “that can’t be done.” It took us a few minutes to un-

wedged over the tops to create a kind of cage. There were old, torn mattresses, some with brownish stains dried hard into the fabric.

Along one wall was a shelf of books, including selected works of Lenin and a biography of Stalin, seized from their owners for their dangerous content. Internal police-employee files, jammed into drawers rusted shut by time, included I.D. cards for thousands of *orejas*—“ears,” the civilians who worked for the police as informants, ratting out their neighbors. Years of personnel lists, or *nóminas*, lay scattered on tabletops, identifying individual police agents and their superiors, where they served and in what capacity. There were hundreds of rolls of undeveloped film, huge outdated computer floppy disks; enormous

A police logbook (left), and the identity record of Víctor Manuel Gutiérrez, who was disappeared in 1966. Photographs by Daniel Hernández-Salazar (left) and Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional (right)





Photograph by Misty Keasler





leather-bound ledgers listed “captured communists” in the faded spidery ink of long ago.

For human-rights investigators the archive was the discovery of a lifetime, the long-abandoned scene of a terrible crime. The effort required to salvage the records and recover the evidence buried in them, however, seemed beyond human power. Even more challenging, how could the countless pages be rendered meaningful to the rest of society? Would their opening lead to another symbolic acknowledgment of the brutal past or to a transformation of the country’s history? Even Guatemala’s official human-rights office wondered what to do with the archive.

The government treated the question with studied indifference and did nothing. Meanwhile, relatives of the disappeared clamored for information about their loved ones, though the

files remained in chaotic disarray. In desperation, Carla began calling for help among Guatemalan and international allies. I contacted Trudy Peterson, a former chief archivist for the U.S. government, and asked if she would write an assessment of the archive, and she agreed.

By the time the report was finished, it was clear to Carla that they would need Trudy’s assistance over the long term, in addition to all their other needs: equipment, materials, more staff, and a secure space. In the absence of government support, others stepped into the breach. Most of the normally fractious community of local human-rights groups offered volunteers. And after the United Nations Development Programme agreed to serve as the project’s fiscal manager, international donations began to pour in, jump-started by a pledge from the Swedish govern-

ment for \$2 million. Germany, Holland, Switzerland, and the Spanish state of Catalonia followed suit with several more millions of dollars. (The United States, after the American ambassador and a political officer toured the archive, donated 106 metal shelves.) Eventually, the prosecutor’s office was able to hire dozens of staff members. Trudy began flying regularly to Guatemala in 2006, thanks to the Swiss.

I tagged along recently as Trudy met with the team laboring over the Detective Corps records. There were two long tables in the room, with eighteen people busy at work: earnest twenty-somethings, fresh out of university; young rads with iPods, nose rings, and Che T-shirts; and a few older, more serious ex-militants. Some used soft, fat brushes to sweep each page clean of grit, then removed ancient staples, reattached loose photos, and bundled





linked files together with cotton ribbon. Others examined the records for content, flagging incriminating text for investigators.

Watching Trudy study the documents was like seeing someone decipher ancient runes. Over time, Trudy has slowly uncovered the secret language of the bureaucracy, and now she teaches the staff how to interpret internal file numbers, what ink stamps belong to which departments, and the reasons behind differently colored copies. With the bureaucratic code broken, an investigator can tug at the thread of a human-rights crime and follow it to its source—the unit of the police that committed it, the names of the individual officers involved.

The head of the team, a young woman named Mónica, who was wearing a lab coat and pink glasses, read out their achievements to date: 389 box-

es of documents covering the ten-year period being examined by investigators (1975–85, the most violent years of the war and the focus of the project). “And we’ve found a lot of political information in the documents—like notations written by hand on the backs of identity cards that say ‘*comunista*’ or ‘*subversivo*.’ There are lists of file numbers and dates on them too.”

Trudy seized the opportunity to teach an archiving lesson. “If you are trying to figure out what happened to a disappeared person, you would start with his name and locate his *ficha* [the identity record], and one of the numbers on the back of it will refer to a *libro* [the oversized ledger that indicates when charges—or *denuncias*—were filed against suspects], and the *libro* will give you the file number of the *denuncias*, so you go to them and examine the nature of the charges, and so forth. That’s why

we want to keep the document types together: with all the *fichas* in one group and the *denuncias* in another, and the radiograms and reports and correspondence in their own sets—all within the Detective Corps. That’s how the police filed the documents themselves.”

When the prosecutor’s staff first secured the archive in 2005, they were eager to search for evidence of human-rights abuses right away, concerned that the site could be shut down by government fiat or broken into and damaged. Although they understood Trudy’s directive to keep together documents produced by each section of the police, they didn’t immediately grasp her further instruction to preserve record groups as they found them. Until Trudy began her regular visits, the staff would pull the documents apart and reorder them chronologically. It took months, but she finally





convinced them to do it her way, “because that’s the only way to trace what these agents were doing,” she explained. It’s also the only way to ensure what archivists call “continuous custody”—a legal guarantee that documents have not been tampered with or taken out of their original context. By protecting a record’s chain of custody, the human-rights prosecutor guarantees that it can be introduced as evidence in a criminal case.

As she and her Guatemalan colleagues reviewed the documents together, Trudy came to understand something crucial about the National Police: they weren’t very interested in fighting crime, and the files were not organized to support prosecutions. What was important was the hunt for subversives. The National Police were consumed by the chase, the kill, and the need to cover their tracks. Take the *novedades*,

for instance. Each unit of the police produced these regular reports on its activities for a given period and sent them to the unit’s commanders, creating a steady flow of information from squads to section chiefs, from section chiefs to police headquarters, and from headquarters to the head of state. Together, the reports give a dramatic sense of the grip the security forces had on daily life in Guatemala City. Police units raided businesses and private houses, searched school buildings, set up roadblocks, conducted sweeps of markets, bus stations, the public zoo. They entered printing companies to hunt for subversive literature, and auto-repair shops in search of suspect cars. They monitored cemeteries and investigated pirate radio transmissions. One of the activities police described in the *novedades* was the discovery and fingerprinting of unidentified corpses

(known in Guatemala as *cadáveres xx*); when they could, they would match the dead person’s prints with fingerprints already on record, and write the name of the now identified corpse across the file. Investigators are now reviewing the *xx* files and comparing them with morgue, cemetery, and exhumation reports in an attempt to identify some of the thousands of still-nameless bodies.

One of the key documents in the archive is the *ficha*, the personal file card. At age eighteen, every adult in Guatemala is issued a small I.D. (known as a *cédula*) with his or her photograph and identifying particulars; the National Police would in turn create a larger index card that contained the same information as well as a complete set of fingerprints. The cards served the dual purpose of controlling the population and providing the state with a convenient means to track dissidents—the



police used them to scribble notes about a person's suspected political tendencies. For example, the *ficha* found in the archive for Víctor Manuel Gutiérrez—a schoolteacher and prominent leader in the Guatemalan Workers' Party after the CIA-sponsored coup that ousted President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954—was marked “#1 Communist of Guatemala” by the National Police. In 1966, Gutiérrez was disappeared in a joint military and police operation, designed with the aid of U.S. intelligence officers, and was tortured to death. His body was buried secretly in the countryside.

In addition to finding clues about the fate of some of the disappeared, archivists are beginning to understand the mechanisms of cover-up—how the state was able to maintain deniability for so long about so many crimes. Sometimes the process was as simple as censoring from the books information that reflected badly on government institutions. In one of the large bound registries, for example (this one recording citizen complaints to the National Police), a “verbal order” made on April 2, 1982, by the chief of the Joint Operations Center—a unit that coordinated death-squad operations—directs that “all complaints from the public should be recorded as described, except when they are made against elements of the security forces, in which case they should not be mentioned in any document.” Other methods of concealment were more subtle. Anyone perusing the police documents quickly perceives a habit of writing that sounds strange to the ear—the persistent use of the passive voice to describe everything. Police do not kidnap suspects; a suspect “is kidnapped” (*se secuestró*). Security forces do not assassinate; the victim “is shot and killed” (*se disparó y se murió*). A police report from November 1983 reveals that this grammatical tic was a matter not of dialect but of deliberate choice when one agent, describing his surveillance outside the home of a suspect, slips uncharacteristically into the first person. “Approaching the house, I was able to observe a young woman,” he writes, “who, when she noticed my presence, jumped up and looked at me suspiciously, so I decided to retreat.” This section of the report is cordoned off in red ink and a note is written in the mar-

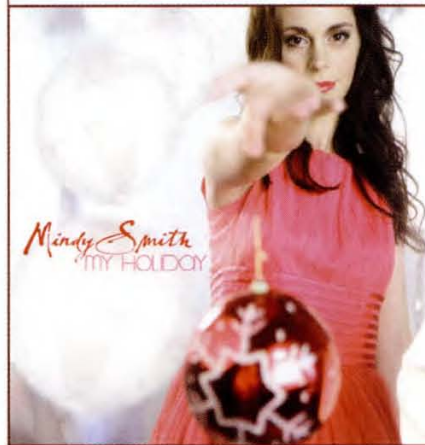
gin: “Never personify—the third person must always be used.”

Investigators also have come across records documenting United States involvement with the police. Throughout the civil conflict, the U.S. government offered Guatemala support and official cover through security-assistance programs that provided training, equipment, and financial aid in an ostensible effort to “professionalize” military and police forces. For the National Police, that aid was channeled mainly through the Office of Public Safety, a worldwide police-training program established by the International Cooperation Administration (the precursor to the Agency for International Development, or AID). Guatemala became the program's first Latin American beneficiary in 1956, after a detective with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department named Fred Fimbres wrote an assessment of the National Police for the U.S. State Department. His study showed that the Guatemalan police considered traditional police functions—such as keeping the peace—secondary to their mission. “Operations, top level planning, [and] intelligence gathering activities are singularly directed toward alertness and preparedness against the ‘threat of the communists,’” wrote Fimbres—a focus, he added, bordering on the “obsessive.” The report concluded that the United States should provide the National Police with technical and material assistance.

U.S. police advisers launched the program a few months later and spent the next eighteen years working side by side with their Guatemalan counterparts. The National Police sent hundreds of agents to be trained by the U.S.-administered international police academies at Fort Davis, Panama, and in Washington, D.C., as well as to local police laboratories in cities across the continental United States. Thousands more were schooled by American advisers inside Guatemala in criminal investigations and crime-lab skills, riot control, firearms, fingerprinting, interrogation, surveillance, and counterinsurgency techniques.

Washington's concerns about Guatemala intensified dramatically in 1968 when members of the Rebel Armed Forces killed U.S. Ambassador John Gordon Mein in a botched kid-

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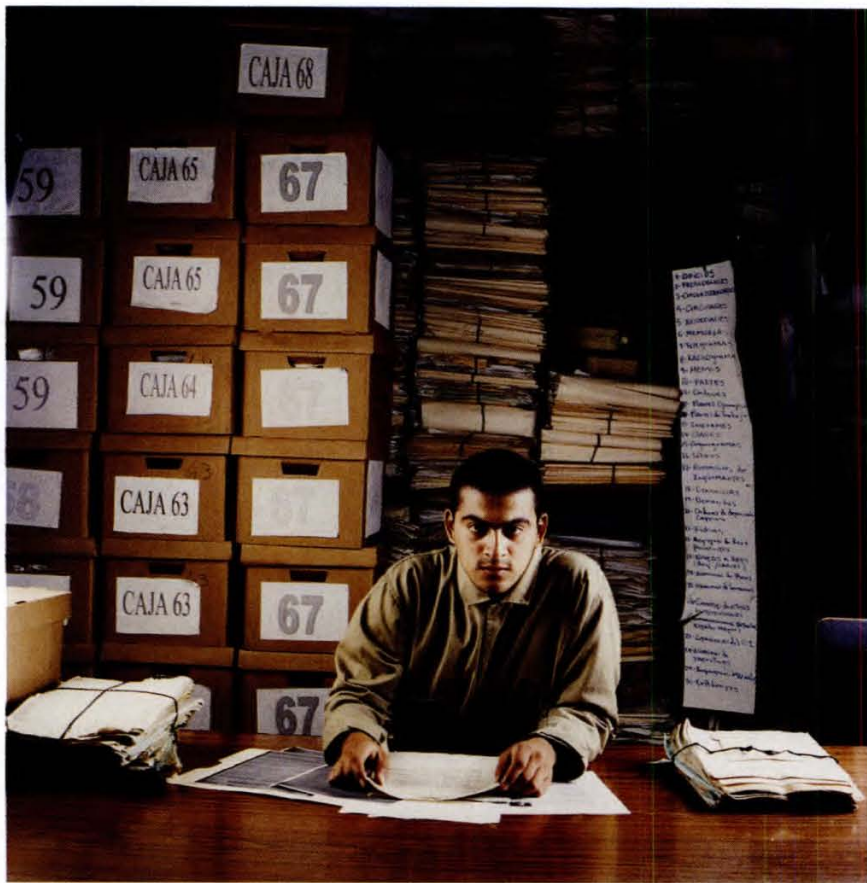
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verted the Guatemalans to the “Henry Classification System” (named after Sir Edward Henry, a British police inspector who developed his method for criminal investigations in colonial India). The Henry system improved the ability to identify an individual by his fingerprints, file the prints, and search them systematically. Once the change was made, police stations in every administrative department of Guatemala adopted the new method, authenticating their work with an ink stamp marked “Henry fingerprint office.”

As I looked through the records of the Gabinete de Identificación, I saw the characteristic stamp on one after the other of them; the fingerprints themselves were laid out on a card divided into ten small boxes, five on each side for each hand, each box designated by the finger that should go there, from the *pulgar* (“thumb”) to the *meñique* (“pinky”). Adriana, a young woman working with the I.D. records, pulled out a card they had found weeks before. The *ficha* was inside an envelope and attached was a letter sent by an agent working in the field to the chief of the “Henry section” of the Coatepeque police station, dated December 7, 1974. The letter described the discovery of a rotting corpse floating in the Suchiate River in San Marcos department, hands and feet tied, beaten, and tossed into the water to drown “by unknown individuals.” Due to the putrefied state of the body, the agent explained, he was unable to take the prints properly: “I was left with no alternative but to cut the fingers off and send them in place of the impressions.” I opened up the envelope. On the Henry card, the policeman had somehow glued ten sliced, shriveled fingertips, now gray with age, into their corresponding boxes.

**L**upita oversees the team analyzing records of the police department’s Second Corps. (Like many of those working in the archive, she asked that I omit her last name.) When I visited, she was looking at the files of the unit’s hospital, where political prisoners were hidden in a clandestine section called the *cuartito* or the *cuarto especial* (the “little room” or the “special room”).

napping. AID police experts were assisted by CIA officers acting undercover in order to establish intelligence liaison with security forces and help design their counterinsurgency strategy. U.S. advisers built a new training academy for the National Police and created a special radio network to help senior police and military officials coordinate operations on “high-level security matters.” As a result of all these activities, letters flew between Washington and Guatemala City, many preserved in the police archive: The chief of the Ident-

tification Cabinet, Sergio Lima Morales, seeks a set of cameras with telephoto lenses in order to photograph the faces of people at demonstrations. Herbert O. Hardin, of the Office for Public Safety in Washington, receives a request for training of two officers in the handling of weapons. Five Guatemalans take a four-month course at the International Police Academy in fingerprint records.

**F**ingerprinting became a special focus of the program after U.S. advisers con-



The internal records of the hospital list the names and ages of detainees held secretly; Lupita was matching them against lists of the disappeared distributed by activist organizations during the same period. For example, the Association of University Students published a list that included Dr. Carlos Padilla Gálvez, a surgeon who attended the needs of the poor and who was kidnapped on August 26, 1982, from his hospital in Sololá by unidentified armed men. In one of the police hospital's internal records, Dr. Padilla appears as a prisoner scheduled to be transferred to the "special room" on September 12. (Padilla was one of the lucky ones. Two months after his abduction, the government ordered his release from the Second Corps hospital after members of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission made a personal visit to Guatemala to investigate his and other cases of forced disappearance.)

Like many of the older investigators at the archive, Lupita—whose husband was disappeared in 1983—has spotted the names of people she knew as she sifts through the police records for the prosecutor's office. In one of the registries listing "subversives" seized in anti-communist sweeps in the days after the 1954 coup, she even found her grandfather, "which is so strange, because he always said, 'Screw the communists!'" she told me with a smile. Lupita considers her work among the police documents "*un regalo de vida*": "the chance of a lifetime." I heard that phrase a lot from former-militants-turned-archivists. They are people whose fates were turned completely upside down by the conflict—men and women, now middle-aged, who gave up every semblance of normal life to join the movement.

Gustavo Meoño, the archive's director, was seventeen when he left his family in 1966 to join a radical group of American Maryknollers helping peasants settle an uninhabited jungle region in central Guatemala. He threw his lot in with the guerrillas after the missionaries were recalled from the country by their order in 1967. As a result, Gustavo never attended university; he operated underground as an organizer, "talking to labor leaders, to students, to Christians," slipping into

and out of Guatemala secretly until he returned for good in the mid-1990s. "I came from a poor family," he tells me, "and it was a shock for them, who worked so hard to get us into school." Gustavo is a tall, mournful-looking man whose heartfelt style inspires many of the younger archive employees—just as he inspired a generation of young Guatemalans to join the movement during the 1970s and '80s. He is the first to admit that the clandestine life robbed him of any hope for a vocation—"I have no training except for what life has taught me"—but sees the archive work as a natural extension of the fight for justice that he says consumed him during the armed conflict. Gustavo's background is by no means unique within the project; many of the senior personnel overseeing the effort to rescue the files come directly out of the *militancia*—former leaders, guerrilla combatants, fund-raisers or organizers, now enjoying the chance of a lifetime to make sense of their struggle through documents that explain, in part, why it was doomed from the start.

I first came to know Claudina from her passport photo, a small black-and-white picture glued into a bound log-book that the Guatemalan military created in the 1980s. The document was stolen from the secret files of an army intelligence unit and made public eight years ago in this magazine. It lists the names of 183 people kidnapped or killed by the security forces, their aliases, their ties to guerrilla groups, and details about their abductions and their fates. Each entry includes a small photo of the victim next to the text, pictures that were separated from university I.D.'s, drivers' licenses, passports, or national identification cards and stuck into the book. Claudina is number 31. From her picture, she looks fearless and a little haughty, her chin held high, hair unruly, with a broad face and arching eyebrows. She looks like a survivor. Her entry says she was captured on December 23, 1983, and freed two weeks later.

We met face-to-face last March at my hotel in Guatemala City. She was much smaller than I had imagined and not at all haughty—intelligent and intense instead, with little granny glass-



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es and still-unruly hair, but soft-spoken too, with a kind of deep clarity about the past that comes from years of reflection, and a voice soaked in sadness. She slipped out of her office shoes and curled up on my bed to talk. Before she was kidnapped, Claudina told me, she and her companion, Víctor, were working for the PGT-PC (a division of the Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo, the Guatemalan Workers' Party). He was an official in the group's directorate, and she was helping to produce the party broadsheet, *Claridad*. The couple lived together with their two small daughters, juggling job and family with their clandestine activities. Víctor is also in the logbook, a dark-eyed and strikingly handsome man, with a tense, wary expression. Claudina was thirty-nine and pregnant with their third child when he was murdered by government forces. According to records found in the police archive (which Claudina hasn't yet seen), he was shot on November 1, 1983, by six "unidentified individuals" driving a Ford Bronco without license plates, who chased his blue pickup truck until he crashed into the side of another car. Víctor was dragged from the truck by the attackers and taken away in their van. "On the following day at 1:30 in the morning, on one side of the crafts market in Zone 13, the cadaver was located . . . presenting various bullet wounds in different parts of the body."

What impressed me most about Claudina during our interview was her rejection of victimhood. "All of this was a consequence of a choice that we made—consciously, maturely," she said. "It was a consequence of our struggle, during which we knew life could be very short." Claudina was kidnapped seven weeks after Víctor was killed. She was taken to a room somewhere with a hood over her head. She spent the next twelve days on a mattress under a naked lightbulb. She passed the time by writing down all the English words she could remember and counting the bricks in the walls surrounding her. She was not physically tortured, but her captors would taunt her about Víctor and threaten to hurt her children. While she was being held, the army emptied her house—"they grabbed the telephone, the curtains, everything, including all our papers"—

even her photo albums. As a result, she was left with no contemporary pictures of Víctor. Eventually, they decided she was insignificant to them and freed her, warning that she would have to tell them about other subversives if she wanted to live. She fled to Mexico instead, and that is where she saw the logbook for the first time, in 1999.

"It was so unsettling," she recalls. "When Víctor died, his face slowly became hazy to me. I couldn't remember exactly what he looked like. It always bothered me. I would try to picture him, but I just couldn't imagine his features clearly anymore. Then I turned to the page and saw his photograph. I was shocked. It was like suddenly having him there in the room with me." She found others in the logbook as well—other friends, other colleagues, whom she hadn't thought of for years. To see them, "to read those pages revived my terror, it revived my rage, it revived my feeling of impotence . . . To read in the logbook the details of what had happened, like what day someone was captured, for example—to read that, laid out as though it were totally normal or logical, brought me right back to that time. It was as though a memory that was hidden away in some little corner returned to the present, as though it were happening again. And that woke a kind of restlessness in me, and a wish to do something. I think that it was also in that moment I felt a nagging feeling that I should *act*—because I hadn't had the ability to do anything or talk to anyone about it."

Claudina returned to Guatemala in 2000 and began working for a human-rights organization. Her son—who was, as he pointed out to me, kidnapped too, since he was the baby inside Claudina when she was abducted—is twenty-three years old now and works as one of the investigators in the police archive. He looks just like Víctor. It was he who found the documents about the murder of the father he never met.

**T**he survival of the National Police archive may seem difficult to comprehend. But its destruction would have contradicted the force that drives bureaucracy itself. "I record, therefore I am": the files are the proof of a gov-

ernment's power. They shelter the history of its officers, of their importance, achievements, and investigations. During times of state terror, even the most incriminating documents may not be discarded, because the agents responsible for them believe that their institutions will survive forever. And afterward, it is often too late. Enduring regimes like Guatemala's produce a massive paper trail, which cannot be disappeared overnight.

But the citizen also needs the files. The archive does more than simply confirm his status as victim; it preserves and restores his history. Contained within the records of repression in countries around the world is evidence not only of brutal abuse but also of defiance and social protest—a rejection, even during the most intense periods of state violence, of a regime's economic and political project, and a re-imagining of what the country might become.

Today, the Guatemalan police archive hums with purpose. The ruined cars that cluttered its entrance have been pushed aside. The little patio in front has been swept, and a fence has gone up around the buildings. Inside, more than 200 people labor over the records: some cleaning them, some boxing, others reading or typing on computers bought with the help of the European donors. There are eight state-of-the-art scanners that operate sixteen hours a day; more than three million pages have been digitized so far.

"We've made a complete inventory of everything we have now, and we update it every day," Gustavo told me. "I want an archive that is ordered, organized, and accessible. That is my dream. I think about it all the time—with the shelves lined up and everything in its place. I want the research to continue indefinitely, so nothing can happen to destroy it or interrupt the work." He pauses. He is lost in his reverie. The years of struggle, the lost youth, the scattered hopes, the dead companions have come to this. "I want to create a museum, a memory center. It's another dream. This place should be cleaned of all the garbage so we can build a park and plant trees with the names of the disappeared. It will be a forest of memory." ■