

Guatemala:
Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny
by Jean-Marie Simon
Penguin, \$38.50

Reviewed by W. GEORGE LOVELL

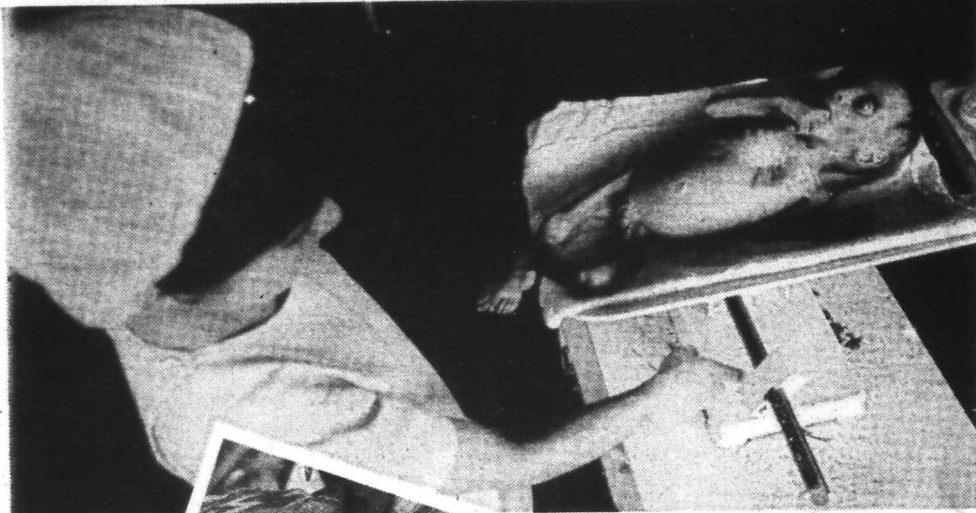
IMAGINE, IF YOU CAN, the naked body of a young woman, her head turned to one side, eyes closed, lips apart, a mouth half-open that says nothing but tells everything. She is dead. A soiled cloth has been laid across her genitals. Her arms, in repose, are arranged across her chest, but they have no hands. These have been cut off at the wrist — one hand is placed beneath her right arm, the other on top of her stomach. The left side of her face shows that she was pretty, but the right side has been mutilated. Three deep gashes on her right arm stand out more than the myriad other lacerations.

That she had life taken from her in a frenzy of agony is beyond question. An ooze of yellow matter, uncontained by the stitches sewn from skin to skin by the mortician, runs along what was once the top of her breasts. The polish with which she painted her toenails somehow withstood the torture inflicted on her person, for the tip of her big toe, left foot, has a fleck of red unmistakably lighter in color than her dry, crusted blood.

Her name is Eugenia Beatriz Barrios Marroquín. Like Guatemala itself, this photograph of one of its citizens, one of its victims, screams in silence, a tragedy we glimpse through the eyes of Jean-Marie Simon. It is important that Canadians know something about the particulars of this case, for Beatriz Barrios had solicited, and received, formal permission to enter Canada as a political refugee. She had been issued a visa, and was to have left Guatemala to arrive here only a day or so after her fatal abduction. Simon writes:

On December 10, 1985, two days after [Vinicio] Cerezo's presidential victory, 26-year-old Eugenia Beatriz Barrios Marroquín, a schoolteacher and mother of two small children, called for a taxi to go to a friend's home.

Minutes after she left in the taxi, she and the driver were stopped by a car carrying three armed men who forced her out of the taxi and into their vehicle. Barrios had either been under heavy surveillance or the call that she made to the taxi dispatcher had been monitored by government intelligence. Although the taxi driver returned to tell her friend about the abduction, it was too late. Her body was found the following day, near Palín, Escuintla, by the painted quetzal-bird rock... A piece of cardboard found near the body carried her name and the words "more to come." When security agents arrived to take fingerprints from her severed hands, Captain Armando Villegas, head of the Honor Guard G-2 intelligence office, was already there. When they asked him, "Mucha, what happened?", Villegas responded by taking out a card on which he had written Barrios's name, and told them that it was she. The writing on Villegas's card matched that on the cardboard message.



Above, a dying nine-month-old infant in Guatemala City

Left, embroidered blouse worn by women to denote their place of origin

which she wrestles — subtle, blunt, powerful and sad, a pattern with no fixed design. Few places take, but also give, so much as Guatemala. Simon is careful to have us celebrate as well as mourn. Her photographs demand that we rejoice, not just lament; for "a nation of prisoners" is also "a nation of survivors."

As a writer, a consultant to Americas Watch and Amnesty International, Simon focuses, understandably, on contemporary issues of human rights. Their flagrant, incessant and bestial violation in Guatemala has had no more courageous and dedicated a reporter. At times, however, historical and geographical accuracy suffer at the journalist's hand, casualties of insufficient background reading, uncritical acceptance of recycled myths, or an editor's deadline. Her text is informative and well-written, but perhaps Simon's photographs, like those taken by Susan Meiselas in Nicaragua and El Salvador, could have stood on their own. They are indeed striking, and here form an impressive collection. An Ixil mother, child in her arms, encircled by government soldiers, stares towards us during interrogation. Stopped at a roadblock, a passenger on board a bus peers from the window into our eyes. Dawn at Nebaj, an ethereal church rising above the mist that shrouds rooftops and cornfields. A member of the armed forces dances with a young girl at a party, a sub-machine gun slung across his back.

Think about what you see, these images beseech, when you look at the world. In the end it is a visual memory that Simon bequeaths us, one that lingers and haunts, soothes and disturbs, a terrible beauty. □

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President-elect Vinicio Cerezo condemned the Barrios killing and "expressed his desire to see those guilty caught as soon as possible." No one has been arrested. Captain Villegas is now a director in Cerezo's presidential guard.

Simon has captured, and set in context with remarkable clarity what took place in Guatemala this past decade. She documents the sweep of events that, in the past six years alone, has seen the country pass through "two presidential elections, two military coups, two states of alert, two Constitutions, an 11-month state of siege, at least four amnesty periods, and four heads of state — three of them army generals." The statistics are chilling. Two out of every five of Latin America's "disappeared" are Guatemalan. Some

100,000 "political killings" have occurred since 1966. Between 1980 and 1984, about one million Guatemalans, most of them Maya Indians, were displaced from their homes in the countryside, where the armed forces perceived "communist subversion" to be endemic. Today, even though a civilian president ostensibly governs, it is the army, by its continued occupation of the countryside, that effectively rules Guatemala. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the so-called "Ixil triangle," a remote area whose fields, folklore, people, and "model villages" are highlighted in Simon's extensive photo-essay.

As an artist, Simon's range is eclectic, her touch varied, her vision always keen and sure. She moves skillfully from dark to light, mirroring in the moods of her pictures the complex landscape with

Guatemala: A terrible beauty