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Gavin Robert Betzelberger

Off the Beaten Track, On the Overground Railroad: Central American Refugees and the Organizations that Helped Them

In 1983, Nelson Sosa and his brother were forcefully recruited by El Salvador's Civil Defense Militia before they were old enough to go to high school. A year earlier their father, Elicio, had fled the country because his colleagues and friends had been assassinated. Elicio reached the United States and found help in a newly formed network of churches called the Overground Railroad dedicated to helping refugees from Central America. With their help he gained temporary residence in the United States, found work at a real estate agency in Wilmette, Illinois, and worked to rescue his wife, two sons, and their other three children.¹

Because the U.S. government was reluctant to grant asylum to Central Americans, the Overground Railroad helped refugees secure asylum in Canada through primarily legal avenues via an extensive network of churches and volunteer communities. Other "tracks" of the Railroad focused on delaying the deportation process as long as legally possible. Though not openly defiant like some refugee advocacy organizations in this period, the Overground Railroad successfully delivered thousands of war-torn refugees to safety.

The Overground Railroad helped Elicio get asylum papers and mail them to his wife. She then tracked down which boot camp Nelson and his brother had been placed in and went there with the asylum papers in hand. She confidently asserted that those papers, written in English, guaranteed the release of her sons. The guards, who were intimidated by the official looking seals and fine print, released her boys. Knowing that the Civil Defense Militia² would soon discover their mistake, she got all her kids on a bus and was out of the country before nightfall.³

On June 5, 1985, the Sosa family arrived in Mexico City where Ruth Anne and Richard Friesen, Overground Railroad volunteers, met them and arranged for the next stage of their journey to the U.S. The Friesens literally held the Sosas' lives in their hands for the next several weeks. It was a harrowing journey for the family.

They crossed the Rio Grande on the trusses of a sunken bridge, were captured by the INS and later released. After almost a month of traveling, the Sosa family flew into Chicago. There, Elicio was waiting for them with Julius Belser, the founder of the network that had delivered them to safety.⁴

The Overground Railroad believed that the Sosa family had a strong case for asylum in the U.S. even though none had yet been granted to Salvadoran refugees in their federal district. In 1986 the case, prepared for months by volunteers and pro-bono attorneys, went to court. A year after the Sosa family told their story in the federal courts, residence cards granting asylum arrived in the mail.⁵

Happy though it is, Nelson Sosa's story belongs within a larger, darker chapter. In order to understand the plight of central American refugees and the actions and convictions of the organizations that aided them it is best to start with the causes. In this case political turmoil and social violence in El Salvador and Guatemala dislocated hundreds of thousands of people who migrated north. Mexican and United States immigration policies forced this dislocated population to reside illegally in those countries or to seek asylum in Canada. Finally individuals, churches, and communities across the U.S. became aware of both the presence of a large population of illegal and unrecognized refugees, and their own government's implication in the violence (or at least the complacency that allowed it to continue). This awareness and compunction caused them to actively search for ways to aid Central American refugees on both personal and political levels.

Central American Context

The Sosa family were only one among hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the violence and instability in Central America during the 1980s. In El Salvador, for example, a civil war raged between the guerrilla group known as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Salvadoran government.⁶ In this war, the clandestine guerrillas were out of reach of the government and government-sanctioned paramilitaries, so the government resorted to tyrannizing vocal moderates. The Roman Catholic Church was one of the most outspoken advocates for social justice and therefore became a target for the right-wing death squads.⁷ These squads circulated a flyer reading, "Be a Patriot, Kill a Priest" and terrorized many rural churches suspected of sympathizing with the guerrillas. This did not stop the church or quell dissidence; quite the contrary, the attacks on the church fueled the revolutionary forces.⁸

In 1979, General Carlos Humberto Romero's dictatorship had been toppled without bloodshed by a junta of young idealist military officers. The new leaders promised to restore justice, address class inequalities, and hoped to reunite the increasingly polarized parties. The Carter Administration gave plentiful aid in hopes that this coalition government would lead to a more stable democratic one.⁹ Unfortunately, the new junta proved too weak to hold the country together. The assassinations of Mario Zamora, a prominent politician, and of Archbishop Oscar Romero effectively ended the unity movement.¹⁰ In the wake of their deaths the country erupted in protest and Major Roberto D'Aubuisson Arrieta, already convicted for murder, took control of the government. The other military leaders fell into line behind the new dictator, who was President of the Constituent Assembly and founder of the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Nationalist Republican Alliance, ARENA).¹¹ D'Aubuisson and ARENA's hard line against the communist left appealed to the new Reagan Administration in the United States. Attributing guerrilla warfare and political dissidence in Central America to the meddling of the USSR and Cuba, Reagan liberally supported the "democratic" anti-communist government.¹²

Reagan used El Salvador as a test case for his administration's tough new anticommunist stance in Central America. This new campaign was set off with the CIA's release of the "White Paper," which presented the guerrillas in El Salvador as the tip of an intricately planned communist expansion financed by the Soviets and orchestrated by Cuba. According to the "White Paper," the Marxist Sandinista takeover in Nicaragua was merely the first phase, soon to be followed by communist takeovers in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Congress released twenty five million dollars in aid, more than El Salvador had received in the previous forty years combined.¹³

In the few months leading up to Reagan's inauguration in January 1981, Cuba had actually shipped arms to the FMLN in El Salvador using Nicaragua as a conduit; however, the Sandinistas were reluctant participants. They did not believe that the Salvadoran FMLN was organized or powerful enough to support as serious allies, even though they shared some ideological similarities to the Nicaraguan FSLM.¹⁴ The USSR was also reluctant if not indifferent to the affairs in Central America. Even Cuba retracted its support after the failed FMLN January offensive of 1981.¹⁵ Thus, under scrutiny the White Paper's factual basis broke down, revealing it to be merely a carefully timed political stunt. Nevertheless, under

the banner of communist containment, its release successfully expanded U.S. military aid to Central American countries with dubious human rights records.¹⁶

Guatemala, El Salvador's neighbor and the "White Paper's" supposed "second phase" of communist expansion, had been ruled by a military junta almost continuously since 1954, often with the support of the United States. However, it had lost its U.S. military aid in 1977 under Carter's increased humanitarian scrutiny.¹⁷ Then, following the fraudulent election of General Angel Anibal Guevara, a group of about twenty midlevel officers seized control. They reappointed General Efraim Rios-Montt, justifying their actions by pointing out the obvious corruption and human rights offenses of the previous regime.¹⁸ Rios-Montt announced a fourteen-point plan to reestablish a democracy although he did not set dates for the accomplishment of that goal. He also proclaimed that the government would "achieve individual security and tranquility based on absolute respect for human rights."¹⁹ Because of Guatemala's promised human rights improvements, its staunch support of the U.S. containment policy in Nicaragua, the recent fall of Somoza's regime in Nicaragua, and threat of a similar coup by the FLMN in Guatemala, the Reagan administration reinstated the funding Carter had withheld.

To Congress' credit, funding to Guatemala was heavily scrutinized and contingent upon human rights improvements. Nevertheless, starting in 1982, Rios Montt launched a massive counter offense dubbed by those who witnessed it as the "Scorched Death Policy." It sought to destroy the Guatemalan guerrilla support by destroying crops and targeting politically moderate civilians in contested regions.²⁰ In the wake of this campaign thousands of Guatemalans joined the refugees from El Salvador in fleeing across the border to Mexico.

Refugee Policies in Mexico and the United States

Many of the Guatemalan refugees first crossed the Mexican border to the state of Chiapas, where they had familial relations and protection and could more easily return home when the violence had passed. This region had once been a part of Guatemala and still retained many cultural and economic ties to Guatemala. Chiapas was poor; two-thirds of the population was without sewage, one-fifth without potable water, two-thirds without electricity, and less than half had obtained a third grade education. There was only one hospital bed for every five thousand inhabitants. Initially the

refugees were mistaken for the seasonal migration of Guatemalan workers, but by 1983 over 35,000 refugees resided just across the border of Mexico in the Chiapas region with an estimated 70,000 living further inside Mexico.²¹ As Mexico received more and more refugees from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, it struggled to create a feasible policy for dealing with them.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) helped prospective refugees apply for visas in Mexico, but from 1980 to 1986 only one hundred were granted, and none between 1986 and 1990, despite the hundreds of thousands of refugees who flooded into the country during that time.²² This was partly due to the fact that Mexico's undeveloped immigration system simply offered no provisions for refugees. Mexico's response to the influx of refugees was to make a refugee zone, a 150 kilometer-wide berth along the "armed curtain" of the Guatemalan border. Guatemalans traveling outside the refugee zone would be deported.²³ Those refugees in the zone stayed in a number of newly constructed refugee camps. But conditions in the camps remained poor because of the region's poverty, the inaccessibility of the camps, and the Mexican government's resistance to outside aid. The vast majority of the refugees lived illegally in other areas of Mexico or continued to work their way north toward the United States.

For the numerous refugees who made it north, the U.S. had different, yet no more hospitable policies. The United States had been clearly biased in favor of immigrants fleeing communist states and against refugees coming from U.S. allies. The Refugee Act of 1980 was aimed at fixing the bias. This was done by broadening the language used to define a refugee to include anyone who was unable to avail themselves of the protection of their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution. However, Congress could not agree on the finer points of the new policy so they left details to be worked out by the newly formed Board of Immigration Appeals and the INS. In practice these organizations followed the State Department's suggestions rather than acting as an independent bodies.²⁴ Because El Salvador and Guatemala were democracies supported by the U.S., the Reagan Administration was reluctant to admit the human rights offenses caused by these governments and in turn pressured immigration authorities to discredit refugees from these countries.²⁵

So, despite the Refugee Act's "well-founded fear of persecution," Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees were deported *de facto*. In 1988 a training video was released to the public, in which the INS

mocked Salvadoran refugees and stated that 99 percent of their cases should be denied.²⁶ Not surprisingly, 97 percent of Salvadorans and 99 percent of Guatemalans were declined asylum.²⁷ From 1980 to mid-1985, only 626 out of 10,000 Salvadoran applicants were granted political asylum.²⁸ In 1985 a census estimated that only 80,000 of the 280,000 Salvadorans in the U.S. were legal immigrants while only 70,000 of the 205,000 Guatemalans were legal.²⁹ Illegal refugees who were caught by the INS were sent to processing and holding centers, which came to be called *los corralenes*—the stock pens or corrals—by the illegal refugees. Despite state sanctions, INS officers consistently tricked refugees into signing “voluntary” departure agreements before letting them meet with lawyers. Within a week or two the refugees would be flown out of the U.S. and returned to their country of origin.

U. S. Refugee Aid Movements

The majority of illegal refugees crossed the Rio Grande or entered in Florida. By 1983 churches in these regions had begun to notice the new trends in illegal refugees. Because many of the refugees had religious ties, and the United States was clearly involved in the unrest in their countries of origin, these churches also felt obligated to do something. Many churches were frustrated by the evasive tactics of the INS and the continued deportation of refugees to the dangerous situation from which they had fled. Numerous independent organizations sprang up to try to assist the refugees. Among these, many came to self identify with the well-known Sanctuary Movement.

The Sanctuary Movement was started in 1980 by James “Jim” Corbett, a Quaker in Arizona. He sent out five hundred letters of appeal to the Unprogrammed Friends Meetings across the U.S. From these letters the Sanctuary Movement was born. Gambling that the U.S. government would not want to square off against churches or draw attention to Central America, the Sanctuary Movement housed illegal refugees inside their church buildings and tried to draw as much attention to their actions as possible.³⁰

The Overground Railroad and Jubilee Partners, a partner organization, took a different approach. Knowing that Canada was accepting many of the refugees that the U.S. refused to acknowledge, these two organizations went into refugee centers and sought out refugees who were interested in securing asylum in Canada.³¹ Canada had two tracks for awarding asylum through the 1976 Canadian Immigration Act. Any refugee who made it

to the Canadian border gained asylum simply through border presentation. However, refugees who applied for visas and asylum via Canadian Consulates were eligible for one year of financial sponsorship by the Canadian Employment and Immigration Commission, CEIC. The pledge of support by Canada included language and culture training, money for travel, housing, and career counseling for the first year.³² Of 13,000 total refugee sponsorships per year, 2,500 were designated for Salvadorans in the late 1980's.³³ The Canadian Council for Refugees explained their generosity: "If we are regarded as among the best in the world it is not because we are perfect, but because the standards internationally are so low."³⁴

In many ways, Canada could afford to have a generous acceptance policy because Mexico or the United States received the lion's share of Central American refugees. Canada may have also seen immigrants as potential settlers for its still developing frontier. But its open door policy also stemmed from a keen awareness of its own cultural history. In the previous decade Canada had received Indo-Chinese Refugees. And Canada received a great number of Mennonite and Brethren refugees in the eighteenth century, groups who had strong representation in the Canadian Parliament.

Origins of the Overground Railroad

The Overground Railroad originated from a Mennonite intentional community called Reba Place Fellowship in Evanston, Illinois. Reba Place started from a small but radical religious reform known as the Concerns Movement, named after a series of pamphlets published by a Mennonite press and circulated among the Mennonite and Brethren churches. These pamphlets criticized the complacency of the church in Europe for not acting decisively leading up to World War II and for not speaking out against the obvious injustice during the war.³⁵ These pamphlets emphasized social justice and responsibility and stressed the danger of alignment with government. Some of the most influential theologians in Mennonite history struggled during this period over the relationship between the church and state. Out of this context, a small group of students from Goshen College, Indiana, started a communal house they called Fellowship House. Here, under the guidance of John Miller, a seminary professor, they experimented with a community model based on the church in the biblical Book of Acts.³⁶ John Miller was soon put on "active leave" because of his radical theology, but, ironically, he used this free time to establish a Voluntary Service unit in Chicago from which Fellowship House expanded and became Reba Place.³⁷

In Comer, Georgia, there was a similar, though rural-based, intentional community named Koinonia. Koinonia was founded in 1942 with the help of the radical Christian author Clarence Johnson.³⁸ Because Reba Place Fellowship and Koinonia shared an emphasis on social justice, pacifism, and close-knit common-purse communities, they formed a close bond. By 1980 Koinonia had already begun to work with refugee issues by forming a nonprofit organization they called Jubilee Partners, which primarily helped Cuban refugees.³⁹ Subsequently, they created a refugee training program and worked the Canadian consulate in Atlanta to gain visas for the Central American refugees. Jubilee Partners had already helped forty-four refugees gain Canadian visas when in 1983 Julius Belser sent out a letter similar to Jim Corbett's.⁴⁰

Julius Belser, who had met the Sosas when they arrived in Chicago, was aware of what Jubilee Partners was doing, but he also believed there was a great potential for a dispersed network of churches and volunteers working with refugees. The name Overground Railroad was specifically chosen for this network to emphasize its moral connections and physical similarities with the Underground Railroad. Additionally, the name suggested that this network looked first for legal ways to address the needs of refugees. Belser believed that people would act out of a common acknowledgement of a Christian responsibility to care for these disempowered people: "You too must love the alien, for you once lived as aliens in Egypt."⁴¹ He wrote a letter of intent and mailed it to the Mennonite and Brethren churches in the U.S., asking for support. Next, Belser approached Richard and Ruth Anne Friesen, a newly wed couple, about doing reconnaissance in Texas to assess how and where Reba Place could help.⁴² The Mennonite Central Committee, MCC, sponsored this three-month exploration. Before the end of the three months the Overground Railroad had already taken its first two families to asylum in Canada. They also published the first three issues of the Overground Railroad's newsletter, the *Telegraph News*. The newsletter contained a definite tone of urgency. Belser and the Friesens realized almost immediately that there was an immense need for a network like the Overground Railroad.⁴³

The Friesens returned to Reba Place and discerned what specifically was needed. There was a great need for transportation, housing, legal defense, and other amenities for the refugees. The Overground Railroad would essentially supplement the separate Sanctuary Movement by pursuing legal routes and means. While at

Reba, funds were raised to provide all the operating expenses for a yearlong residence for the Friesens in southwestern Texas.⁴⁴

The strategy of the Overground Railroad was to secure for refugees who had already been captured a voluntary departure with permission to travel, or to get them into the asylum process, which ensured them legal residence for a few months. Voluntary departure contracts guaranteed that refugees would leave the country of their own will within an allotted period of time, typically a few months, but allowed them to stay legally in the United States until they left. These few pivotal months were gained by showing that the refugee had resources to apply for a Canadian visa and the means to feed and house themselves in the mean time. After a while the organizations themselves gained enough repute that a simple letter vouching for the refugee was enough.⁴⁵

Refugees were recruited for the Overground Railroad from South Texas refugee shelters and INS detention centers. Refugees in the detention centers would typically be deported within twenty-five days and because deported refugees had frequently been assassinated when they arrived in their countries of origin, they were a very high priority for the Railroad.⁴⁶ Since the majority of the refugees were bailed out of detention centers, one of the primary needs was for bail funds. Because bail was returned when the refugee was admitted to Canada, this fund could be used cyclically. The revolving bail fund was created almost exclusively from personal donations. Donors could expect to eventually receive their money back and could withdraw their funds if they needed. Personal loans were also taken out in a pinch.⁴⁷ Once temporary legal residence had been gained, the refugees would leave the Rio Grande Valley in volunteers' cars or on the "Year of Jubilee," an old bus that the Overground Railroad and Jubilee Partners used.⁴⁸

Refugees would be taken to Jubilee Partners or to other communities dispersed throughout the Midwest. Jubilee Partners housed forty or so refugees at their communal farm in Georgia, using the same strategy to gain temporary legal residence for their refugees. In addition, while at the farm refugees were enrolled in a three-month orientation and language course, the purpose of which was to improve refugees' chances of asylum (the ability to speak English was looked upon favorably) and to prepare them for adapting to life in Canada. The Canadian consulate would meet the refugees either in Atlanta or at the Koinonia farm for an interview. Virtually all refugees who applied through this program were granted asylum in Canada.⁴⁹

The most significant difference in Reba Place's complimentary program was the use of a dispersed network of churches and communities. This entire network, rather than exclusively Reba Place Fellowship, bore the cost of supporting refugees during the sometimes lengthy asylum process. Basic requirements for a church or support group included a Spanish speaker who could translate and a place for the refugee to stay with basic provisions for six to twelve weeks. The group would line up a medical examination (required for a Canadian visa), something to do during the day if possible, and a friend for emotional support who could also help them get ready for their interview.⁵⁰

The biggest limiting variable in the network was the sponsorship of refugees once they made it to Canada. Assuming that most refugees apply from their country of origin or neighboring countries, the CEIC granted only 450 of the 2,500 sponsorships to refugees applying from consulates within the U.S.⁵¹ There was a far greater need for support of refugees sojourning through the U.S., so the Overground Railroad turned to the Canadian Mennonite-Brethren church networks for support. The 1976 Canadian immigrant legislation had also permitted the private sponsorship of additional refugees in the CEIC refugee program. In fact, the Canadian churches, service clubs, and NGO's had already utilized this apparatus to provide relief to 25,000 Indo-Chinese refugees in the late 1970's and early 1980's.⁵² Still, private sponsorship cost a church about \$250 per person each month, a daunting sum to small Mennonite and Brethren churches in Canada. To try to ease their burden and encourage more churches in Canada to sponsor refugees, the Overground Railroad lined up partner churches in the U.S. to share half the expenses.⁵³ The Mennonite Central Committee in the U.S. and Canada was helpful in lining up host congregations, providing logistical support, and extending its services to the refugees. For instance, Mennonite Mutual Aid health insurance policies were offered to refugees.⁵⁴

The MCC had a long history of activism. MCC international aid and service efforts began in 1928 when Canadian Mennonites heard rumors of plundering, repression and imprisonment of Mennonites in Russia. They borrowed \$2.5 million from the railroad for travel expenses and transported tens of thousands of Mennonites fleeing Russia by the Canadian Pacific Railroad to new homes across Canada. Canadian Mennonites had since been involved in the aid of Chinese Christians escaping to the Philippines and eventually to Canada.⁵⁵ When the Mennonite Central Committee met in 1984 they

discussed the importance of refugee work in the U.S. and Canada with an emphasis on the work of the Overground Railroad. There was some reluctance on the Canadian Mennonites' part because this was a burden passed on by the U.S. churches, but the tradition of compassion for the alien was much stronger. For many Canadian Mennonites, their own history convicted them to act.⁵⁶

Articles from Canadian churches appeared frequently in the *Telegraph News*. They typically noted the rapid progress of the refugees and tended to express lasting relationships between the host communities and the refugees, though more troubled letters sometimes arrived at the MCC and Overground Railroad administrations. While most resettled refugees adapted quickly to their new environment and were eager to help the Railroad by sending money and offering their homes as stops, others struggled. Many refugees suffered from post-traumatic stress and found the culture, climate, and language trying.

Despite a few hiccups, by mid-1985 the Overground Railroad was on solid ground. The hosting and public sharing model they had created was so successful that by July the waiting list for host churches was more than eight months long. The administrative staff—altogether six compensated staff split between Evanston, IL. and Brownsville, Texas—was even able to relax a bit about finances.⁵⁷ Then the Canadian Consulate in Dallas directly contacted the Overground Railroad and asked it to help them fill a bonus 150-person sponsorship quota for that year. The Canadian Refugee Board recognized the probable need for more sponsorship of refugee applicants in the U.S. and redistributed 150 sponsorship slots to its consulate in Dallas for Salvadoran refugees.⁵⁸ Because the government sponsorships relieved the burden from the Canadian churches and the organizational burden from MCC, they were highly sought after. Instantly, the Overground Railroad switched into high gear; this would be the first real test of the Overground network. A veteran MCC mission worker volunteered several months to help with translating. People across the Midwest sent in money to post bail for applicants and cover the additional \$6,000 to \$10,000 cost for processing. In the end it was a success; the Overground Railroad alone was able to fill almost half of the new spots.⁵⁹

Provisional Legal Refuge

In May of that same year, Jim Corbett of the Sanctuary Movement asked if the Overground Railroad could help enroll into the asylum process refugees who were about to be deported from the U.S.⁶⁰ The

Refugee Act of 1980 had created some avenues for illegal refugees to secure safe temporary residence. Until then, the Overground Railroad had been getting temporary legal residence for refugees through the use of volunteer departure agreements. While the INS was willing to grant temporary stays to refugees who agreed to leave via the Overground Railroad, voluntary departure only worked for refugees they knew they could place in Canada. However, under section 208 (a) of the Refugee Act of 1980, aliens in the U.S. could apply for asylum while undergoing the deportation process, prior to detention, or to a judge by submitting an application during a deportation or exclusion hearing.⁶¹ Once the asylum process had started the refugees could not be deported until the legal process was concluded. If refugees were in the asylum process or involved in continual appeals, they would be provisionally legal until conclusion. Neither Jim Corbett nor the Overground Railroad had much hope of achieving actual asylum in the U.S. because success rates were less than three percent for Salvadorans and equally low for Guatemalans. Nevertheless, if they continued to appeal and string out the legal process they might be able to protect the refugees and keep them in the U.S. for a few years. So, starting in July of 1985, the Overground Railroad started legally bailing out refugees from the detention centers and enrolling them in the U.S. asylum process. This new bonded refuge was called Provisional Legal Refuge or PLR for short.⁶²

PLR did not have relocation to Canada as its primary goal but instead sought as great an elongation of temporary residency as legally possible. The appeals process alone could last up to three years for an asylum case, during which time a lot could happen to help refugees. For instance, with the help of his or her host a refugee could go on to a declared Sanctuary church. Alternatively, a refugee could present him- or herself at the Canadian border for asylum without sponsorship, or gain legal U.S. residency through a labor certification (meaning they had become indispensable to their employer and the U.S. economy), or get in line for visas to foreign countries. Another possible reprieve might come from the DeConini-Moakley Bill calling for a temporary freeze on deportation, which the Overground Railroad and MCC supported.⁶³ At the very least PLR would keep refugees out of danger for a little longer.

Working With the INS

The INS, for its part, passively impeded the various organizations helping the refugees. Many of the churches and organizations

affiliated with the Sanctuary movement complained of the constant evasive movement of detainees from one facility to another and the frequent and unannounced changes in legal protocol.⁶⁴ These frequent changes not only encumbered the legal proceedings for asylum cases but also seriously endangered organizations like the Overground Railroad. In 1983 the INS in Southern Texas denied the voluntary depart forms they had consistently awarded refugees headed to Canada. Suddenly finding its legal foundation suspect, the Overground Railroad planned to defend itself, asserting that it had gone as far as possible under the legal system.⁶⁵ Although the Overground Railroad was never accused of wrongdoing, several closely affiliated groups were prosecuted for missteps. On January 29, 1987 Stacey Merkt, who worked for Casa Romero and Proyecto Libertad (two organizations with which the Overground Railroad had close ties), began a 179-day sentence for helping to transport illegal refugees.⁶⁶ Casa Romero was also raided by the INS under false pretenses, and later forced to relocate. In surprising contrast, however, the INS publically stated that it had no objections to the work of the Overground Railroad. As Mary Jude Postal explained it, "We violate the spirit of the law, but we don't violate the letter of the law... It's kind of a delicate relationship publically. In the Rio Grande Valley, we really can't use the word sanctuary or our contacts in the INS and our ability to work with them would close off."⁶⁷

In December of 1988, the U.S. sent agents to Mexico and Guatemala to coordinate INS efforts with the Servicios Migratorios.⁶⁸ The next year the number of detainees jumped from 15,000 to 80,000 and the numbers have grown higher every year since. In March 1989, the INS started a new policy of massive detention and deportation. In May they announced the early success of this new program. To match the increasing refugee processing in Texas, the Overground Railroad set the goal of doubling their volunteers in that state by creating a small community of volunteers in Harlingen by the fall of 1989.⁶⁹

Correspondingly, the *Telegraph News*, the Railroad's bi-monthly newsletter, also shifted from recounting the daily exploits of Railroad workers and volunteers to more politically relevant information. The newsletter continuously relayed the personal stories of its passengers and regularly asked for support, but it also began to feature articles written by the various other refugee programs around the country. They published special editions focusing on the new INS policy, and were featured in

several major publications such as the *Christian Science Monitor*. The newsletter included articles by the United Nations Human Rights Council and the Latin American press. It also began to announce protests, fasts, reform campaigns, and projects led by numerous other organizations as well as encouraging its readers to join organizations like the Christian Urgent Action Network for El Salvador.⁷⁰ A "resources" section was created on the last page of the newsletter listing recent studies, books, and presentations available to their affiliated churches and organizations. The Overground Railroad also made video and multimedia presentations that affiliated groups could borrow to compliment their own publicity programs.

Jubilee Partners and the Overground Railroad were not just waiting and working for change in the U.S; they looked abroad. As early as 1984, Jubilee Partners sent Don Mosley to France to explore the possibility of sending refugees to Europe and Australia.⁷¹ They sent delegations to Nicaragua and Honduras to better understand the political volatility of that region. They visited the refugee camps in Mexico to see if there were ways of directly helping in the camps and reported back to the network in long, heart wrenching, and heavily political letters reprinted in the *Telegraph News*. The Overground Railroad had also started organizing tours of the network itself by the mid-1980s. Participants from the affiliated churches visited the Jubilee Partners, the Overground Railroad's office in Texas, refugee shelters like the Casa Romero, and the INS detention centers.⁷²

The intimate involvement of every group along the Railroad proved to be essential to the movement because it created powerful ties between refugees and otherwise unaffected churches and communities. PLR and regular sponsors had a direct interest in the larger political climate in the U.S. The smallest change in policy could seriously affect their new neighbors. The Reagan Administration was portraying Salvadoran refugees as Communists, but the refugees themselves often contradicted this stereotype. Many were union members, farmers, church leaders, and professionals, which resonated with the rural Midwestern communities. Their stories brought the war, struggle, injustice, and pain of Central America home and were too compelling for most communities to remain on the sidelines.

By 1990 the network crisscrossed with dozens of similar smaller refugee organizations, many of which sprang up to receive refugees and later grew autonomous. The Lancaster Inter-religious Network

for Central American Refugee Action, LINCARA, was one such organization supported by seven different denominations.⁷³ The Overground Railway itself displayed a full gamut of different host congregation denominations; Presbyterian, Brethren, Catholic, and even a school in Kansas that took on the responsibility of helping to raise funds. The Overground Railroad also received help from numerous legal firms. The most notable organization was probably the nonprofit Proyecto Libertad based in Texas.⁷⁴ As the churches and refugee organizations helped by raising money, providing housing, educating, and transporting the refugees, the legal firms worked the asylum cases and provided legal guidance.

When the civil war in El Salvador ended in 1992, the Overground Railroad ended with it. The United States had clearly perpetuated the conflict in El Salvador and Salvadorans had in turn been the largest constituency of the Railroad. Many of the Railroad's former passengers returned to try to find families and help the reconstruction of their nation. The Overground Railroad and various member churches sent individuals to Central America to continue what had become a central ministry of reconciliation and social justice. In this way many of the communities continued to be actively aware and involved in politics and humanitarian action, while the Overground Railroad's transnational track was quietly dismantled.

It has now been twenty-five years since Nelson Sosa won asylum in the United States. He stayed in Evanston, IL working for Reba Place because they "trust [him], and treat [him] like a family member."⁷⁵ Today the Overground Railroad stands out as a reminder that there are ways to pursue social justice within legal frameworks. More importantly it stands out as a successful model for the mobilization of an unaffected populous. As Sosa puts it, "The Overground Railroad was a miraculous scheduling feat."⁷⁶ The Railroad may never have been big enough to bring all the thousands of refugees to safety, but it did bring Central American refugees and their struggle to hundreds of thousands of Americans and Canadians.

Notes

- 1 Nelson Sosa, interview with author, March 26, 2010.
- 2 Sosa, interview. The Civil Defense Militia was created by the Salvadoran army by forcefully recruiting locals. After the initial recruitment and training the majority of the enlisted soldiers would leave. The remaining paramilitary force was led by a dozen or so army men, and sustained through continued forced recruitment.

- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
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- 9 Ibid., 44.
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