Lives Apart – Family Separation and Alternative Care Arrangements during El Salvador's Civil War

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Supervision and technical assistance from David Tolfree

For the Save the Children Alliance

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Executive Summary

This study was commissioned by the Save the Children Alliance initiative "Care and Protection of Separated Children in Emergencies" (CPSC) the very interesting phenomenon of El Salvador's disappeared children. The fieldwork for the study was undertaken by the author heading a small research team, consisting of two research assistants, one of them a former "disappeared" child. Considerable emphasis was placed on the active participation of children (now mostly young adults), their families of origin and foster or adoptive families. A small group of young people (who had also experienced forced disappearance) assisted in analysing the material stemming from interviews, surveys and focus group discussion.

The study is based on the experience of PRO-BUSQUEDA[1], a Salvadoran organisation founded in 1994, two years after the end of El Salvador's twelve year civil war. PRO-BUSQUEDA has brought together hundreds of families searching for their children who disappeared during the civil war, in most cases abducted by government forces. Since its foundation, PRO-BUSQUEDA's investigative unit has documented 653 cases of disappeared children and has solved 204 of them.

PRO-BUSQUEDA's experience is unique in many ways. It combines aspects of family tracing with a search process more similar to that of Argentina's Grandmothers of the "Plaza de Mayo". Because the disappearances occurred in a framework of massive human rights abuses which often constituted several human rights violations in themselves, PRO-BUSQUEDA's work has many legal and political implications. Additionally, the investigative unit has gathered substantial evidence on the issues such as child trafficking and improper conduct by private institutions such as the Salvadoran Red Cross. As the Salvadoran government has set out to cover the past with a blanket of forgetfulness and impunity, PRO-BUSQUEDA's work is not looked upon very favourably in official circles.

The study provides some detailed background information and illustrates the wide range of circumstances in which children disappeared. The main objective is to describe the range of care arrangements which the disappeared children experienced. Four categories are identified and discussed: children brought up in residential institutions, international adoption within the Salvadoran legal system, *de facto* adoption (which can also be described as fostering or appropriation) and growing up on a military base.

In order to obtain the material for these chapters from first hand sources, interviews and surveys were conducted, primarily with the young adults who experienced alternative care arrangements as children, and additionally with the families of origin and adoptive families in El Salvador and overseas. One workshop was conducted in a larger group to discuss some of the issues that had come up in the interviews and four young people agreed to collaborate by recounting their life stories in some detail. All of the young people taking part in the study had disappeared as children and spent the rest of their childhoods away from

1 PRO-BUSQUEDA means "In search of"

their own families: all had been reconnected with their families through the work of PRO-BUSQUEDA.

In each of the alternative care arrangement categories, many interesting issues arise. The lack of affection and emotional care is commonplace in the residential institutions, though peer-relationships emerge as an important source of support. The lack of documentation in residential homes, coupled with the falsification of registration documents, has created difficulties in relation to the children's right to a name and identity. Issues relating to personal and cultural identity come to the surface insistently in the cases of international adoption, although, on the whole, the quality of care was valued very positively by the young people.

The most complex and diverse results are to be found in the category of *de facto* adoption within El Salvador. Legally this is strictly a form of fostering; however the young people themselves usually refer to their relationship with these families as "adopted", but this has not been formally or legally established as is the case with international adoption. The experiences the young people shared about this care arrangement tend to be either very positive or very negative, with very little in between. Often, they maintain a very close relationship with this family today and experience a conflict of loyalty between the adoptive and biological family. This informal adoption arrangement served most children well during their childhoods, but as this study documents, the informal or illegal aspects of it may end up constituting a threat to its success in a latter stage, and especially when the family of origin reappears, creating, for some, a profound identity confusion.

After the initial family separation, most of the children went through a short period of time at a military base and some stayed for longer periods of time. This study documents two brothers who grew up in a military base, spending eleven years there in what constitutes a highly unsatisfactory care arrangement.

In the course of the case study several cases of abuse and exploitation are described and discussed. However, it is the study's objective to create an overall view of what the disappeared children went through after the family separation and as much emphasis is laid on positive aspects of care and protection as on negative aspects.

Forced disappearance is a violation of various human rights which continue until the child is found. The forced disappearance of boys and girls is still one of the unresolved matters from the peace process that urgently needs to be addressed. Many conclusions can be drawn from El Salvador's experience with disappeared children; many things could have been done in order either to avoid the separation or to bring the separated families together much earlier.

Prelude: Magdalena and Francisca – two brave women who initiated El Salvador's search for disappeared children

My name is Magdalena and I am from a small village in the Chalatenango province of El Salvador. When I was just thirteen, the war started and when I was fifteen I gave birth to my first son, Nelson. His father had been killed by the army a few months before he was born. We had to flee to the mountains, me and my parents and many other people and the army was chasing us all the time.

One day the soldiers finally caught up with us. We tried to escape but it was no good. They captured me with my baby and my mother as well and many more people, mostly women and children. Only my father managed to escape. They took us to a place called Loma Pacha (meaning "flat hill"). There the soldiers called for helicopters and after a while the first one arrived. They started to ask the women for their children. They would take them from their arms and put the children in the helicopter. The machine was filled up quickly and flew away. Then another helicopter came. This was when the soldiers asked me for my child, Nelson. The poor thing; he was only six months old. I held him in my arms and refused to let him go. My mother threw herself between the soldiers and me. But it was impossible. They threw my mother on the floor. I begged them to kill me there with my child, but no… The soldiers grabbed my baby and pulled until they tore him away from me.

That afternoon the helicopters took away more than fifty children from Loma Pacha and all the women were left crying. We spent the night in the open air with the soldiers watching us. In the morning they started to take the adults, one by one, away from the group. We could hear how they were interrogated and killed. That's when my mother and I decided to run. Taking advantage of the soldiers being distracted for a short moment, we were able to escape.

Days later we found my dad. Fortunately, he was still alive, but my son had been lost and I was paralysed with grief. We managed to escape our country and went to a refugee camp in Honduras. But I never stopped thinking about Nelson. I talked with people from the church and other organisations but nobody was able to help me find him. We stayed in Honduras for six years and then we moved back to El Salvador.

In the same community that I lived in after returning from Honduras there was another woman who had also lost her child in the same military operation in which Nelson was taken away. Her name is Francisca. She was very hopeful her daughter was still alive. Someone had told her they had seen her daughter in the city of Chalatenango after the operation. We shared the illusion of finding our children again and we became very close.

When the war finally ended we hoped for more possibilities of finding our children. Together we went to present the cases of our missing children to the (UN) Truth Commission[2]. We hoped that they would search for our children, but they didn't. However, Father Cortina, the parish priest, said he would talk to us and encourage us to not give up hope and keep on going.

2 For further explanation about the UN Truth Commission in El Salvador see Chapter 1.

We passed the news of our search on to other families. We told them what we wanted to do: we were to leave no stone unturned until we'd found our children. We said to them: "Look, they are our children. The Peace Accords have been signed and now is the time we can finally look for them. We have to get together for this search". We talked with Father Cortina about the idea of going to court. As we were not taken very seriously and we didn't have any positive results from the judges, we planned other activities: we joined in a public demonstration and wrote a letter to send to the orphanages.

Because the war had just ended, many people were still afraid. Some said we were crazy, that we were messing around with the past and that they were going to cut our heads off because of what we were trying to do. On one occasion Francisca told me: "I hope to God, Mayda, that we are the first to find our children, so that the people can see that what we are doing has not been in vain! I hope to God that the people realise that what we are doing is not crazy old women's stuff!"

We felt motivated to carry on with this search because we didn't demand anything that wasn't ours. Our children are our business! If a mother has lost her child, she has every right to ask for him or her everywhere she can! To look for her child all over the country!

Many people thought we were crazy but fortunately others thought differently. More and more families joined the search. And then something wonderful happened; I found my son in an orphanage in the capital and we also found Francisca's daughter and some of the other children we were looking for. We had our first family reunion on January 16, 1994. We all cried a lot out of sheer happiness. Then everybody said we were right in looking for our children and many more families joined the search, families from Chalatenango and from other provinces as well. We decided that even though we had already found the children we were looking for, we were going to help other families to look for their children as well. Father Cortina agreed to continue working as well and that's how PRO-BUSQUEDA was born.

List of Abbreviations

COAR	Comunidad "Oscar Arnulfo Romero" (residential institution for children)
CRC	The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
CPSC	Care and Protection of Separated Children in Emergencies
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional – a coalition of guerrilla groups
FPL	Popular Liberation Forces
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
UCA	University of Central America
Unicef	United Nations Children's Fund
US or USA	United States of America

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This case study would not have been possible without the cooperation of PRO-BUSQUEDA, whose help is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks is also due to the staff of Save the Children Sweden, especially Ana Lorena de Orellana, for their practical support.

In conducting the fieldwork for this study, the author was helped by two research assistants, Lucio Carrillo Hernández and Carmen Elena Villacorta. In addition, a group of young people who themselves had experienced "disappearance" and spent most of their childhoods away from their own families, assisted the researcher in discussing and analysing the information gathered during the fieldwork: they were Andrea Dubón, Amilcar Guardado, Armando Ascencio and Mauricio Guardado. Their ideas and insights into their own lives, and those of other young people, have greatly enriched this case study.

1. Introduction, Context and Background

This case study concerns the phenomenon of children who disappeared during the civil war in El Salvador, and is based on the work and experience of PRO-BUSQUEDA[3] for eight years between 1994 and 2002. The organisation was set up by a group of parents who had lost their children during the war (please see the Prelude), and dedicated itself to tracing them and facilitating a reunion where appropriate, and providing psychological support to the various parties. The study was commissioned by the Save the Children Alliance research initiative "Care and Protection of Separated Children in Emergencies", and was undertaken by a consultant who already had considerable experience of PRO-BUSQUEDA, along with two research assistants, one of whom had disappeared and remained separated from his family throughout his childhood. The material for the study is derived from two main sources: first the accumulated experience and documentation of PRO-BUSQUEDA, and second a period of fieldwork undertaken for the case study which sought to examine the experience of a sample of disappeared children (now mainly young adults who had been brought up apart from their own families) using participative research methods. A group of young people who had a similar experience helped in analysing the information obtained from this larger sample.

Historical Context

El Salvador is a small country along Central America's Pacific coast. Most of its five million inhabitants are engaged in subsistence agricultural activities. San Salvador, the capital city, has most of country's economic activity, as well as the government institutions. Throughout the last century poverty was widespread in El Salvador. The per capita income is one of the hemisphere's lowest[4] and in addition, is unevenly divided amongst the Salvadorans. Also the land distribution is very disproportionate, putting the country's main resource, the coffee plantations, in the hands of a few large landowners.

Throughout this country's recent history, a small privileged class has monopolised wealth and political power. The refusal of the privileged to allow political and economic changes, such as land reform and higher minimum wages, created the social polarisation that triggered the civil war. It is important to take into account that the Salvadoran national conflict took place within a context of insurgency and counter-insurgency which, for three decades, dominated Latin America's history.

In 1972 the democratic opposition won the presidential elections, for the first time in Salvadoran history. To reverse this process and maintain power, the mil-

3 PRO-BUSQUEDA means "in search of". The full name in Spanish is "Asociación PRO-BUSQUEDA de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos".

4 US$ 96 per month – Ministry of Economy of El Salvador, 2000.

itary and the official government committed a large-scale fraud. After this many sectors of the opposition were drawn to more radical resistance. Small urban guerrilla units began to operate, sabotaging government interests. Also the popular labour movement gained strength and voiced discontent with the government.

The Army and Security Forces began to run secret operations to monitor and repress opposition. In 1975 a student demonstration against the government was violently repressed, leaving dozens dead and missing. In 1976 the elections were rigged once more, and General Romero took power with the promise to intensify the repression. Growing sectors of the opposition advocated armed struggle as the only possible way to overthrow the government and implement reforms.

The church also played an important role in the conflict. As a result of the influence of "liberation theology" in El Salvador, many priests favoured the workers' organisations and worked together with them to achieve reforms. Thus the authorities also persecuted the Salvadoran church. Monseñor Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador was one of the few Salvadorans who had the courage to publicly denounce what was going on.

In October 1979 a military coup ousted General Romero and a Military Junta was installed with many young reform-minded officers. However, it quickly became clear that right wing elements had regained control over the Army and the repression continued more strongly than before. In some parts of the countryside, where guerrilla activities had sprung up, the National Guard and the infamous death squads massacred entire families. The surviving *campesinos*[5] fled to more remote areas and formed camps with the idea of defending themselves from the National Guard and paramilitary groups.

In January 1980 the popular movement organised a large demonstration, demanding reforms and an end to the violence. Almost a million people concentrated in the capital's streets were violently dispersed by the security forces. Two months later a hit man from the death squads killed archbishop Romero, and during his funeral service in San Salvador's Cathedral the National Guard fired at the crowd from the rooftops, leaving dozens dead. Archbishop's Romero death is often considered as the start of the Salvadoran civil war. During the months following his death, thousands of people were murdered. In the city, students, schoolteachers and labour union workers disappeared from their houses or from the streets. In the countryside the army raided villages thought to conceal people sympathetic to the guerrillas. The soldiers massacred thousands of people, including women and children.

In 1980 the guerrillas moved their main activities from the city to the countryside in preparation for a large-scale popular revolt. However, there were five different guerrilla groups operating, but in October 1980 the five groups agreed to form a common front known as the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional[6] (FMLN). On the 10th of January 1981 the joint guerrilla forces launched a nationwide military offensive. The rebels were able to take

5 Agricultural peasants

6 Farabundo Martí was a Salvadoran communist leader executed by the government after the failed revolt of 1932.

some of the urban centres but the better-equipped Army fought back and forced the rebels to flee into the mountains. After the offensive, the guerrilla forces consolidated their influence in certain areas which they called liberated zones; thousands of civilian supporters of the rebels lived in camps or in the abandoned villages, moving around from one place to another, according to the government army's movements in the area.

In 1981 and 1982 the Salvadoran military directed its strategy against these civilian supporters, because they considered them to be the guerrillas' strength and source of sustenance in the conflict zones. This strategy was known as "taking the water from the fish". During the counter-insurgency operations[7] special US-trained battalions massacred thousands, burned villages to the ground, destroyed crops and livestock, leaving the entire area desolate. By the end of 1982 most of the civilian supporters of the guerrillas, numbering more than a million, had fled to refugee camps in Honduras. Only small groups who refused to leave the country stayed in the mountains with the guerrillas. The FMLN slowly constituted itself into a formal army, fighting for years a hide-and-seek war with the Salvadoran military. Thousands of people were murdered and the Salvadoran Army institutionalised practices of torture and forced disappearance.

During the late eighties, growing international pressure regarding the government's human rights record eventually managed to change the violations from an indiscriminate to a more selective pattern. Starting in 1986 the refugees returned to their places of origin. The guerrilla offensive of November 1989 proved that a military solution to the conflict was very unlikely to be achieved by the government: during this offensive, a unit from the infamous Atlacatl battalion surrounded the installations of the Jesuit University (UCA). The soldiers killed six Jesuits priests, their maid and her daughter. For the first time, international demands, following this event, forced the Salvadoran government to stage a trial of an army officer. International pressure was also crucial in the government's decision to accept peace negotiations.

On January 16, 1992 the government of El Salvador and the FLMN signed the Peace Accord in Mexico, putting an end to 12 years of civil war. In return for the rebels' definite demobilisation, the government committed itself to a widespread democratisation process of the Salvadoran political system, including the political insertion of the former guerrilla forces. Also as a result of these accords, the United Nations established a "Truth Commission" to examine the "acts of violence that had shaken the Salvadoran society". The armed conflict in El Salvador left over 70,000 people dead, more than 7,000 disappeared, and over a million people in exile. The Truth Commission had the difficult task to document thousands of serious violations of human rights, in an 8 month period. In their report entitled "De la Locura a la Esperanza" ("From Insanity towards Hope") the Truth Commission put the information on atrocities committed during 12 years of war to the service of society. The report concluded that during the armed conflict the most basic human rights of thousands of Salvadoran men and women were systematically violated.

7 The El Mozote massacre is the best known of these operations. The Atlacatl battalion systematically assassinated over a thousand people in the province of Morazán, on December 11 to 13, 1981.

Five days after the official launch of the Truth Commission Report, the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador passed an amnesty law that buried the expectations for justice, protected the culprits, and annulled any legal proceedings related to the violations committed during the conflict. Most of the recommendations made by the Truth Commission were rejected by the government and, therefore, never implemented. The work on behalf of the victims' reparation and national reconciliation was then left in the hands of various sectors of civil society. Different community organisations, with support from human rights organisations, compiled information about the victims and carried out an effort to help people from even the most remote areas to come forward and present their cases. This work constituted the platform to help families and relatives organise and search for the truth about their disappeared loved ones. However, neither the Truth Commission nor the existing human rights organisations properly took on board the matter of the forced disappearances of children under 18.

Salvadoran Family Patterns and Substitute Care

In the countryside, unions between men and women are very often not formalised in matrimony. The unions' instability is relatively high. Single parent families are very common. All too often the man does not take social and economic responsibility for the children, leaving the woman to depend on the extended family for support to raise her children. In the rural areas families of up to eight children are common.

Children start to work at a very young age, the girls mainly in the household, and the boys on the land. The adults consider this work to be part of the children's basic education. In some remote rural areas school is not available, or is very distant. A considerable percentage of the children in the Salvadoran countryside do not attend school, or attend only the first couple of grades.

In the rural communities it is common for family bonds to extend to large sections of the communities. Many of the smaller settlements, known as "cantones" or "caseríos" bear the name of the family who settled there. Most families living here are inter-related. This creates a situation in which the extended family has great importance in the individual's life. These rural patterns are reproduced in urban families, although to a lesser extent. In the city, the nuclear family becomes more important, usually with fewer children. It is very common, especially in the rural areas, for the grandparents, and mostly the grandmother, to play an important role in child rearing. The difficult economic situation of most families forces many mothers and fathers to work outside of their village, either permanently or for periods of time, such as during the coffee or sugarcane season. Grandparents are the most common substitute caretakers, but frequently also aunts and uncles or older brothers and sisters take on this role. So even if the mother and father are not able to take care of the children, usually the extended family assumes this role. Exceptionally, in cases where no other families members are available, the caretaker's role may be fulfilled by another, unrelated family.

During the war, the strong ties binding together the rural communities were strengthened in some cases, and in others destroyed. The community and religious organisations relied heavily on the strong bonds between families to spread and gain strength in many parts of the countryside. On the other hand, the Army also attempted to gain a support base in the rural areas, through sponsoring paramilitary anti-communist organisations. In the late seventies, some communities were literally split in two by political strife. However, most commonly a determined community would have developed a more or less uniform political affiliation with either the opposition movement or the Army.

Although selective at first, the violence soon touched entire families or communities. During the early years of the war, in the rebellious parts of the country, community organisation overtook family organisation in importance. The people in these areas were forced to flee from their homes, and even though initially they stayed in the mountains surrounding their communities, they were already to be considered refugees[8]. If a mother or father had been killed or was not able to take care of the children, where possible, their immediate relatives protected the children; if no other members of the community would do so.

Family members in different degrees of blood relations often absorbed orphaned children into their family. Amongst those who sought refuge in neighbouring countries, if no family members were available, fellow refugee families would often absorb into their own families children who had lost their parents. This phenomenon seems to reflect the particular circumstances and dynamics of refugee communities and reflected the strong bonds created between the refugees in those years.

In El Salvador, on the other hand, many war orphans or other unprotected or unaccompanied children ended up in institutions or were adopted by families unrelated to the child's biological family. There were orphanages in El Salvador before the war, but in the eighties the orphanages increased their capacity and dozens of children's homes sprang up all over the country. However, the government considered international adoption to be the most viable (and possibly the cheapest) option for the country's "orphan" crisis. Adoption law was adjusted to facilitate large-scale adoption and hence many children were adopted, mainly from the government run orphanages, to foreign families.

The Phenomenon of Disappeared Children

It is impossible to quantify the number of children who disappeared during the years of civil conflict: PRO-BUSQUEDA has documented 653 cases but the total could well run into thousands. Children disappeared in a variety of different ways. There are documented cases of children who were literally grabbed from their mothers' arms at gunpoint by members of the Armed Forces within the frame of counter-insurgency military operations. Also, on many occasions, children were found alive among dead bodies after a massacre or a battle. The guerrilla groups were also responsible for separating children from their families,

8 The term is used here without necessarily implying that they crossed an international border.

either to free their parents to fight, or, in some cases, children were placed in "safe houses" to give the appearance of normal family life. The situation of extreme danger caused by the armed conflict led some families to put their children under the care of third parties or institutions. The violent events during the war generated countless unforeseen moves and in many cases, in spite of desperate searching efforts, there are families who could never reunite themselves with their children again.

The fate of the children after their disappearance is varied. PRO BUSQUEDA's investigations led to the identification of some general patterns. Some of the children already found – who are now young adults – had lived in different orphanages throughout the country after their disappearance. In many other cases the children were given in "legal" adoptions to foreign families. Other children were victims of illegal appropriation or child trafficking for profit. Many were taken by Salvadoran families and registered as though they were their own. A few children have been found after spending most of their childhood on the military base where they were taken after their disappearance.

Chapter 2 will consider, in some detail, the range of circumstances in which children disappeared, and Chapter 5–8 will examine the experience of a sample of these young people in different care situations.

PRO-BUSQUEDA: Objectives, History and Organisation

PRO-BUSQUEDA, El Salvador's Association for the Search of Disappeared Children is a non-profit humanitarian organisation. The organisation's members are families of the disappeared children, representing over 450 families who have suffered the disappearance of their children during the war. Other members are the children who have been found as a result of the search process, and volunteers committed to fight for the respect for human rights in El Salvador.

PRO-BUSQUEDA was founded on August 20th of 1994, during the first general assembly of families of disappeared children in the town of Guarjila, Chalatenango. Its main goal has been defined as "Searching for the children disappeared as a consequence of the armed conflict in El Salvador and through their reunion meet demands of truth, justice, reparation and contribute to the creation of institutional and legal tools for the solution of this problem"[9].

PRO-BUSQUEDA's objectives[10] are to:

1. Promote the search for disappeared children as a consequence of the armed conflict
2. Defend the right of identity of the disappeared children
3. Defend the corresponding filiation rights of the families and the children found
4. Promote integration among the children found, the family of origin, and the adoptive or substitute family

9 PRO-BUSQUEDA's Strategic Plan, 1998–2000
10 Ibid.

5. Support the moral and material reparation for the families of disappeared children and the children found
6. Promote the participation of government and non-government institutions in finding adequate solutions for the issue of disappeared children
7. Contribute in the construction of a dignifying historical memory in El Salvador

The main ethical and moral guideline for PRO-BUSQUEDA's activities is the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. While defending the family's rights, the child is always protected, and his/her best interest is the determining factor for decisions PRO-BUSQUEDA has to make regarding each case. As the Convention clearly states, the origin and family ties are each child's fundamental and inalienable right.

For the investigation area of PRO-BUSQUEDA the basic question is naturally: where are the disappeared children? This question is the greatest challenge. In 1994, the investigative team began work, without previous experience to draw from, apart from the documentation of the cases for the Truth Commission. Investigative methods have been developed over the course of years of trial and error and will be described in Chapter 3. Because of the large number of cases referred, the investigative team has had to prioritise a number of cases each year in order to be able to conclude some of them. Of the unresolved cases 35 % are currently under active investigation.

The investigator discusses the case with one of the PRO-BUSQUEDA's psychologists in order to evaluate the situation. The psychology team participates in further visits and in the preparation for the family reunion. The case is gradually transferred from the investigative team to the psychology team that will monitor and support the family reintegration process.

The first reunions demonstrated the need for professional support to families and children during the reunion process. PRO-BUSQUEDA currently has a team of three psychologists for this work. The team has accumulated valuable and enriching experience working on these issues for eight years. It has been found that the reunion can raise powerful emotions for the young person, his or her birth family and adoptive family. For the birth family, it may rekindle emotions stemming from the original disappearance and other traumatic events surrounding it. The young person may find it difficult initially to identify with the family of origin, and reunion can create conflicts of loyalty and raise significant personal identity issues (which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7). Finally, the adoptive family may fear that the reunion may disturb their relationship with the adopted young person.

Apart from a more individualised follow-up of the cases, mainly during the stage of the reunions, the team's efforts have been directed into three formats of workshops:

- Workshops with families who have not found their children (with a primary focus on dealing with loss and predicting the possible outcome of the search)

- Workshops with families who have found their children (focusing mainly on family relationships and coping with the issues raised by family reunion)
- Workshops with children who have been found (mainly helping young people to recover their identity and examine the implications of finding their families)

Although the groups have different perspectives and starting points, in the long run their efforts are complementary, and are shared between the groups. Each process consists of approximately ten workshops, each at least half a day long. The children who have finished the workshops sometimes opt to continue to meet independently. Five of them have started an initiative to write a book about their life stories, continuing the effort to fight for recognition and sharing their experience with many others who unfortunately, have not been reunited with their families yet[11].

One of the ethical fundamentals of its work is that PRO-BUSQUEDA does not force the reintegration of the children with their natural families. The children themselves make the decision on where to live and with whom. PRO-BUSQUEDA supports the children whatever their decision is, and encourages the family to do the same.

The right to identity is a legal concept with many implications on a mental health level. Through different means PRO-BUSQUEDA has tried to guarantee that the disappeared children may obtain their true legal identity again. After years of difficulties in arranging the children's paperwork, PRO-BUSQUEDA has achieved an agreement with the Attorney General, in order to facilitate this process. The re-establishment of the legal identity is an important official recognition of the situation and helps the children to straighten things out emotionally as well.

PRO-BUSQUEDA has provided legal support to those families who want to initiate legal actions either nationally or internationally. However, the Salvadoran Courts have not been willing to apply justice or even due process of law in any of the cases presented. For this reason, PRO-BUSQUEDA has presented one exemplary case before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. It has also succeeded in having the Human Rights Defence Attorney investigate 145 cases of child victims of forced disappearance. In March 1998, this office produced a resolution acknowledging the existence of cases of forced disappearance of children in El Salvador. The resolution was backed by recommendations to national institutions to contribute to the effort to find these children and to facilitate PRO-BUSQUEDA's work. Unfortunately, the different institutions have not complied with these recommendations.

The forced disappearance of people is a highly sensitive issue in El Salvador and many other countries in the region. Traditionally, the issue moves between two tendencies: on the one hand, the human rights movement's public demand for justice and, on the other hand, the official posture of "forgive and forget". After the Truth Commission published its report the Salvadoran government for-

11 "Historias para Tener Presente" – "Stories to Bear in Mind" – will be published by UCA in 2002.

mally expressed this public policy of "borrón y cuenta nueva" ("erase the past and start anew") and a general amnesty law was declared. The government's main motivation is their fear that the investigation of past events may jeopardise the impunity enjoyed by those responsible for human rights violations during the conflict, including current government officials.

As PRO-BUSQUEDA'S work progressed, a new activity was begun with the purpose of bringing the issue to the public's attention. Even though the organisation has worked with the local and international press since the beginning, it first launched a public report on the investigations in 1999. The main recommendation was the creation of a National Search Commission for disappeared children, integrated with different government institutions, including the Ministry of Defence, and PRO-BUSQUEDA. The result of a lobbying process was a draft proposal for a commission with participation from government institutions and representatives of the civil society. However, after some encouraging signs, and many delays, the right-wing politicians eventually voted down the proposal.

As a concession to PRO-BUSQUEDA's demands, the government decided on the creation of an inter-institutional workgroup on the issue of disappeared children, led by the Attorney General. PRO-BUSQUEDA provided this workgroup with pertinent information in order to commence its task. After more than a year of delay and pointless meetings, PRO-BUSQUEDA declared its withdrawal from the workgroup stating that there was no political willingness to actually do the job for which the group was created. PRO-BUSQUEDA is now trying once more to obtain sufficient votes to pass the legislative proposal for the National Search Commission.

The organisation has provided technical support to organisations in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, countries in which PRO-BUSQUEDA's experience may also be applied for the benefit of the disappeared children's reunion with their families.

Overview of the Case Study

The case study begins with an examination of the circumstances under which children disappeared or became separated from their families. Chapter 3 describes PRO-BUSQUEDA's work and approach and the following chapter introduces the different care arrangements experienced by the children and examines the methodology used to explore young people's experiences of care. The following four chapters look at different care arrangements – residential institutions, international adoption, *de facto* adoption or fostering within El Salvador and growing up on a military base. These chapters offer considerable detail on the particular care arrangement, while Chapter 9 offers an analysis of the issues derived from these four chapters. The Appendix includes some life stories of disappeared children. While some readers will prefer to read the chapters sequentially, others may prefer to read selectively: depending on the particular interest of the reader, chapters (especially 5–8) may be read individually, while Chapter 9 provides an overview of most of the key issues.

2. *The Stories behind the Disappearance of Children*

This chapter examines the range of circumstances under which children became separated from their families during the civil war. It looks first at the tactics of the government forces which used "elimination" and "forced disappearance" as weapons of war and then examines how children were placed in "safe houses" to give an appearance of a "normal" family. Then it considers other circumstances under which the FMLN created separations; the separation of children in Honduras and Guatemala; and how some children became accidentally separated. Finally this chapter examines the characteristic reactions of families to the disappearance of their children.

"Taking the Water away from the Fish"

During the first years of the conflict, especially the years of 1980 to 1984, the Salvadoran Army carried out military campaigns designed in accordance with the U.S. counter-insurgency concept of "taking the water away from the fish". These operations were conducted in the areas of the country where the guerrillas were strong with the objective of destroying their support base. The governmental forces used two methods: "forced displacement" and "elimination". In many cases both were used at the same time, because the threat of assassination forced the survivors to look for refuge. The Report of the Truth Commission (P. 171) repeatedly refers to these operations and states that:

> *The Commission received direct testimonies of many mass executions during the years of 1980, 1981 and 1982, in which the elements of the Armed Forces, in the course of the anti-guerrilla operations, killed farmers, men, women, and children, who had not put up any resistance, simply for considering them guerrilla collaborators.... Everything proves that these deaths are registered under a pattern of behaviour of a deliberate strategy to eliminate or terrify all of the population of the zones of guerrilla activities, in order to deprive the guerrillas of this source of supplies and information, as well as the possibility of hiding or disguising themselves among the people*

In many of these large-scale military operations, children were assassinated. The best-known example of this tragedy is the collective assassination of children perpetrated by members of the Atlacatl Battalion in December of 1981. Hundreds of infants were locked inside the convent of the church in El Mozote, a small village in the province of Morazán, and fired upon through the open window by machine guns, until all were dead. One witness describes the situation during that period:

In 1980 they came to put a white hand on the door of our house and that meant that, if we didn't leave, they would kill us. In 1981 everything got worse. We lived in the mountains and we had to resist every operation of the Armed Forces, one after another. We fled during whole weeks, without food or water to drink, carrying the smaller children. Almost everyone got sick. Many people died of diseases or they were assassinated. Others fled to Honduras. And others just simply disappeared. I have a lot to tell from all that we suffered. We survived because God is great and powerful

Also, ever since the first military operations in 1980, many children were seen in the military headquarters, brought by the soldiers as survivors of massacres or battles, indicating that children were not only massacred but also abducted from the conflict areas. The children who disappeared as a consequence of the conflict were mostly very young. The younger children were less likely to able to protect themselves, or run and hide from peril. Once they had fallen into the hands of the Armed Forces, they were also less likely to be considered as "enemies", and therefore less likely to be assassinated:

Back then it was frequent to hear that they had brought kids back from the military operation… I remember once that I was walking uphill to the Institute and we stared at the line of soldiers marching into town, all dirty and covered with mud. They carried children with them. They were small children who couldn't walk by themselves. They had tied them to their chest or put them in their backpacks… You could only see the little heads sticking out with a frightened look on their faces

Former members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces[12] declared in interviews with members of PRO-BUSQUEDA that what happened to the children they found depended on the circumstances, on the squad and on the commanding officer. According to these sources, the squads in which the soldiers were taking drugs were more likely to eliminate everybody, including children. Some former soldiers stated that, since 1982, they had received orders to take away any child found during an attack of enemy positions. During a massive military operation on May 31st, 1982 in a place known as Loma Pacha, elements of the Armed Forces gathered a group of approximately 200 campesinos they had captured in the area. The soldiers of the Belloso Battalion, who took Nelson Anívar Ramos (6 months old) by gun-point from his mother, indicated the possible motive:

They told us not to worry and not to cry, because the children were going to serve the government, not us, we would only carry them through the mountains, so that they would serve the guerrillas

Other motives for the abduction emerge from other testimonies:

12 Belonging to an organisation called ADEFAES

A group of women was found by a soldier's patrol. When they saw that there was a majority of elders and children, they ordered the group to go to a place called "Finca Virginia"… When they got there, they were received by the officer in command… He forcefully separated a girl called Leonor from the rest of the group and said he would make her the "daughter of his wife", because his wife couldn't bear any children. Before the pleas and protests of the elder Leonor López, the military officer threatened to take her, "willingly or by force", then he pushed the older woman who continued to beg him not to take the girl

Taking children to give them up for adoption was one of the ways soldiers could derive material benefit from the lack of protection suffered by children and their families during the armed conflict. This motivation appears in other cases where PRO-BUSQUEDA has been able to interview eyewitnesses who survived. In some cases, the disappearances seem to have been motivated by profit to be obtained from the child's appropriation.

During the May 1982 operation in Chalatenango, a large number of children were taken away from their families

When they took my son I started running after the soldiers and I climbed through the helicopter window to try and look for him… I couldn't see him, he was very small, he was six months old and there were children of all sizes. A soldier grabbed me and threw me down. I fell, but stood up again and I went to look through the window on the other side next to the helicopter's end. I don't know if it was the same soldier or a different one, but he threw me down again. The helicopter lifted. I stayed on the ground. My mother stood beside me. We just stood there, looking at the helicopter leaving. All the women were crying. Then the helicopter came back; it came back twice, taking away children, only children

Similar scenes occurred repeatedly in operations in other conflict zones of the country. Generally, the forced disappearance of children took place in the context of general repression that included assassinations and destruction of crops and property.

In some cases it has not been possible to obtain the version of witnesses present at the moment of the child's abduction, because they were all assassinated during the same event. Even so, families have concluded that the military took their children alive because no traces of them were left behind. Also, family members have heard the stories of neighbours and people who tell how children were taken by the military after killing their families:

My brother went to the village two days after the military had passed though the place. In front of the house he found the bodies of E, M R and M and of a very old man named N, but there were no signs of the children, not a trace. We lived near the town of Chalatenango during that time and in those days people said they had brought about 10 children in the helicopters. People said: "They unloaded the children from the helicopters, maybe their parents are dead". We

didn't even try to see the children because in those days, if you went to claim a child like that (in the barracks), one could get stuck there too. During that time one had to be quiet, because if you said something they assumed you were from the FMLN. So everything was left as it was

Because I was hiding behind some bushes, I saw when they took my daughter Juana in the first trip. They took a lot of children, at least fifty. I saw when the soldier grabbed my little girl by the hair to put her in the helicopter and I wanted to go and help her, but I was hiding with my other daughter who was 11 and a two year old boy – I had to take care of them. Soldiers killed my husband and took my little girl and I couldn't do a thing

The Responsibility of the FMLN Members in Forced Separation

The impact of the armed conflict in El Salvador was different in the city from the rural areas. The political persecution was more selective and was directed towards individuals involved in unions or student movements. These groups were accused of having links with guerrillas and their members were persecuted. The guerrillas only operated in the city underground: they rented houses that were used to hide arms and people, to print materials, to store supplies and to hold their secret meetings. In these "safe houses", the members of guerrilla cells tried to maintain the appearance of a normal family. Members of the secret organisation pretended to live as any normal couple or family, usually with their own children but sometimes they had other people's children whose parents were away taking part in the guerrilla movement; they had certain responsibilities within the movement that made it difficult or impossible to take care of their children:

My wife was in a safe house in Reparto Los Héroes with our son. I had been wounded at the time and, when I found out she had been murdered in the house, I didn't know what to do. Some days later, a woman showed me a newspaper clipping where my son appeared in the "Adalberto Guirola" orphanage. Because I was hurt she said she would go and get him. When she went to get my son, she disappeared. Maybe they were already following her, but the fact is that she never came back

On November 1st the army set up a night-time operation against a house that was half a block over from where we lived at the time. No one suspected that it was a guerrilla house; it was big, furnished and nice. The army captured two women, and a girl who was 14. They said that one man tried to escape, but he was captured before dawn. In the morning, while we were going to the cemetery to take flowers to the deceased, we found two children, in front of the abandoned house… They were between the ages of two and three… They were eating some fruit that had fallen from a tree. Some neighbours decided to take them to their house. The adults who had been captured in the house later turned out to have been killed

When the government's security forces discovered a safe house, the place was attacked and dismantled. Sometimes the guerrillas put up armed resistance and at other times the people who lived in the house were taken by surprise and captured. Almost all of the people who were detained under these circumstances are still missing today, including the children.

PRO-BUSQUEDA has gathered evidence that, in some cases, leaders of the different fractions of the FMLN pressured families to leave their children behind in the care of other people, using the argument that the infants were "an obstacle to performing the tasks of the war":

> *They told my sister and me to give our children away because we couldn't run (with the children). They made us hand them over to a strange family. I was forced along with my sister to give away our children, they intimidated us and they wouldn't let us talk. They told us they (the children) would go and we would get them back once we were free, but they forgot their promise*

> *The leaders demanded that we had to give the children away because it was dangerous for them… I could be killed as well while trying to take care of my children. They were going to take them to these people who were part of the same organisation, they said these people took care of the children of guerrillas who were fighting. The man in charge of my children was killed and now, no one knows where my children are*

On the other hand, children had certain "utility" for the guerrilla movement as they could be used as part of the cover-up of a secret operation:

> *In 1978, the organisation sent us to a house in San Miguel where we lived as a family to cover up the real use of the house. In 1980 some of the comrades told my wife and me that it was necessary to take the girl somewhere else, to use her as a cover as well. They told us not to worry because we were going to see her once a month. The second time we went to see her in San Salvador, we got to the house where they kept her, but we discovered that the woman who was taking care of her had fled, taking our daughter along with her. When we got back to San Miguel we explained this to the person in charge of our group. He told us not to worry, that he was going to coordinate with the other comrades to find a way to see her. But he never found a connection. I insisted on looking for her and during each meeting I asked why we weren't able to find her. He said: "If you're insisting too much, I'm going to have to punish you, because what can't be done won't be done. And this (finding your daughter) is simply too complicated"*

In some cases, children were abducted by guerrillas in order to join in the war effort. In 1980, a squad of the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo[13], forced Santos Eulogio Guillen Funes, who was then eight years old, out his house in Cacaopera, Morazán:

13 Revolutionary People's Army, one of the five groups that made up the FMLN guerrilla movement

My little boy was taken by the guerrillas of "Guaruma". They had tried to take him several times before. The sons of a man named Mingo took him because they were guerrillas. I went to talk with the guerrilla members to get my son back, and they threatened me, especially the one who was the commander

The families who are searching for their children hoped that, after the Peace Accords, it would be possible to find them, especially if they had help from former FMLN guerrillas. The lack of integrity of some of those responsible for taking away the children and the poor cooperation received from FMLN members are some of the reasons why some of these children, now young adults, are still missing, nine years after the Peace Accords.

Disappeared Salvadoran Children in Guatemala and Honduras

During the eighties, the Salvadoran guerrilla organisations had secret support and infrastructure in the neighbouring countries. The governments and security forces of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, worked together as part of a regional counter-insurgency plan. In this context, some Salvadoran children living outside of the country were also victims of forced disappearance. Their parents or other people who looked after them were part of the clandestine FMLN structures that worked in those countries. When local security forces detected the safe houses and raided them, both adults and children could be killed or disappeared.

In one case in Honduras, a house was raided and two men were killed and one taken captive. Two small children were also taken alive by the security forces, and another small child was also taken in another raid on an FMLN safe house. When, many years later, a search was undertaken to find out what had happened to these children, it was discovered that they had all been adopted overseas.

The forced disappearances of children is a regional issue that arose as a consequence of the civil wars and counter-insurgency policies implemented in most of the Central American region. The Salvadoran Armed Forces coordinated these kinds of operations with Security Forces in neighbouring countries, much in the same way as occurred in South America. The Armed Forces of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador coordinated the operations described here. To solve these cases it will be necessary to coordinate search efforts beyond the national borders.

Children Voluntarily and Accidentally Separated because of the War

The scenarios described in this chapter illustrate part of the impact of armed conflict on Salvadoran society. The statistics speak for themselves: 75,000 people dead, 7,000 people disappeared and one million refugees. More than 15% of the Salvadoran population had to abandon their homes in the course of the twelve-year conflict. During these displacements, many families were separated in a voluntary or involuntary way. The Life History of Esteban (see Appendix) provides

an illustration of a child who was accidentally separated from his family during the chaos of fleeing from military attack. In the areas of conflict, the people who were part of the guerrillas' support base were not able to move around freely. On the one hand, going towards an area controlled by the Armed Forces could cause their death if they were identified as "guerrillas". On the other hand, guerrilla commanders often interpreted as "betrayal" or "desertion" any unauthorised exit from their controlled area. This accusation could imply strong repercussions, including summary execution for treason.

Under these circumstances, many families tried to assure their children's safety. Paradoxically, families often lost contact with their children while attempting to find them safer places.

> *I was escaping from the war zone with my seven children to go to a shelter for refugees. In our group there were three other mothers, all of them with children… We were only three adults and many children (so it was difficult to keep track of all the children). We were on our way to the church, so that the priest could direct us to the shelter. After walking for a block we noticed that Yancy wasn't with the group any more. We went back to the bus stop to look for her. She wasn't there. No one had seen what happened to her. With the help of the church, we gave notification of the missing girl on different radio stations, but there was never any response*

While the cases of forced disappearance of children took place almost exclusively during the years of 1980 until 1984, the cases of children who disappeared owing to the circumstances of the war occurred even during the last years of the armed conflict:

> *During the guerrilla offensive in 1989 we fled from our house with my parents and all my brothers. We went to the bus terminal (in San Salvador) to take the bus to Guatemala and there was an incredible hustle. It was there (in the midst of the confusion) that we lost the girl, my youngest sister, while we were putting our suitcases on the bus. We looked for her, but we couldn't find her. Finally, we decided to leave for Guatemala without her. We were so afraid*

During the first five years of the war the living conditions in the displaced persons' camps and in the orphanages were deplorable. Generally, in these places, very few efforts were made to find the families of children who had arrived unaccompanied. The priorities were other activities like gathering and distributing food and medicine and curing the children who came in from the conflict zones with all kind of illnesses.

In 1984, Albertina L A, a young female guerrilla fighter, received a suggestion from the local leaders of the FMLN to send her daughter to a safer place because it was too dangerous to stay where she was. When a group of people was leaving the conflict zone, she sent her four-year-old daughter with them to a shelter run by the Archbishop's office:

Because of the situation of war, I wasn't able to leave the area and take the baby girl myself. It was too dangerous and I also had a lot of responsibilities at the front. When the girl was in the shelter, they (the people working in the shelter) said that I had died in combat. That's why they gave my daughter up for adoption to a foreign family. But I wasn't dead, I was at the front with the FMLN

In other cases the people permanently or temporarily in charge of the children, fell victims to the war without being able to inform family members about the whereabouts of the children:

When Veronica died, the only one who knew where her children were was her brother Sergio. He participated with the FPL[14] *in the same area of Santa Ana. He told us that the children were fine and that he would go and get them, in order to give them to me. Then he also died and we didn't know anything about the children. We tried to get information with the comrades, but nobody said anything. Everything was so secret and reserved that it was impossible to find out anything*

During the war, many cases involving disappeared children were presented to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Through searches and investigations, mostly in refugee camps and in orphanages, this humanitarian institution solved hundreds of cases, establishing contact with children and their families. Nevertheless, the ICRC left dozens of cases unsolved, and many others were never presented to this organisation. The Catholic church and other groups also undertook family tracing during the years of the war. In many cases similar to the ones described in this study, the efforts were successful and the families were reunited. However, the more complicated cases in which a thorough investigation was required were commonly abandoned, owing to lack of resources.

Family Reactions to the Disappearance of their Children

The disappeared children's relatives had to face the consequence of many traumatic facts: death, disappearance and forced migration. These had a tremendous impact on their mental health, and although these experiences occurred in the past, they continue to play an active role in peoples lives, generating a series of symptoms that can be classified as the "extreme traumatisation" syndrome.

It is also important to take into account that the civil war often did not permit the families of the victims to obtain the social support necessary for the completion of a mourning process for the lost ones. In the case of the relatives of disappeared children this process was even more complicated because they could not know what their loss had been exactly: whether their children were dead or alive, whether they would see them again soon or whether they would ever have any news about their whereabouts. The denial of the disappearance by those responsible opened an additional wound: uncertainty. This deprived families of

14 Popular Liberation Forces, the largest of the five guerrilla groups members of the FMLN.

two basic elements necessary for a process of mourning: the certainty of the death and the possibility of performing burial rituals:

> *Of those who die, it is known that they are dead. The family is assured that they can go to the cemetery for the funeral. There is a process of mourning that can last for years, but then, slowly, the pain goes away. However, of those who disappeared, it is uncertain whether he lives or whether he has died. This causes much greater despair. You want to know what happened in order to reconcile that with faith. When you don't know what happened, and there is no way of finding out, it is terrible. You are constantly pushed around between hope and despair*

In the case of disappeared children it is also possible to examine the psychological process known as "frozen mourning", used to designate the process where the demands of war or disasters are such, that people are not given a chance to cry for their loved ones. The painful loss is constantly magnified by the anxiety of uncertainty. The disappeared child continues to be painfully present in each family. Speculating about finding their child is often an emotional safety valve:

> *Sometimes I think that my daughter is now already a grown-up. I imagine her remembering me (her mother). Sometimes, I start thinking that she has already died. If we never find her what are we going to do? If she died somewhere in the wilderness, she may have lost her body, but I pray to God her soul was saved. Sometimes I see her in my dreams grinding corn, busy with normal daily household chores. Every day, when I lie down in bed to go to sleep, I feel the pain a mother carries for her (disappeared) children*

When the family refers their case and joins PRO-BUSQUEDA's search efforts, often great expectations are generated in the family. The hope of finding the child are invigorated and the families feel strengthened by the organisation and by knowing other families with the same problem, some of whom may have already found their missing children. When PRO-BUSQUEDA's personnel explore the possibility of not finding the disappeared child with the family, they tend to have difficulties accepting this possibility. The family prefers to keep hope alive, even though the investigation may also result in confirming the loss. Families may transmit responsibility for the search to the next generation to guarantee its continuity. Through this mechanism not only the hope of the finding, but also the emotional burden of the disappearance are transferred. During a workshop with relatives in Morazán one of the psychologists asked what the families would do if PRO-BUSQUEDA was not able to find the children. The group answered as follows:

> *We would be sad if we did not accomplish the goal, but we would try harder, work harder and do more. We would incorporate the rest of the family to work together on the search. Our children would have to continue, and their grand children and so on. We would keep searching until we get results. We would continue to fight without resting*

3. PRO-BUSQUEDA's Search for the Disappeared Children

The search for the disappeared children has been PRO-BUSQUEDA's main effort and focus over the years. Currently the organisation has an investigative unit made up of three full time investigators who take on individual cases and work closely with the families involved, and a team of "institutional" investigators whose main task is to revise and document the information available on children in orphanages, courts and other relevant institutions that functioned during the war[15]. Many of the cases are resolved by the combined efforts of these two components of the investigative unit. Over the last eight years the organisation has been able to document hundreds of cases of disappeared children and to solve a significant number of them.

Obviously, the main objective of the investigations is not to document the cases for scientific reasons, but rather to make identification possible and to promote family reunion[16]. PRO-BUSQUEDA has developed a unique investigative field methodology based on the combination of different techniques, some borrowed from criminal investigation and others from sociology and anthropology. The families are involved in the process as much as possible. A prolonged relationship of confidence between the investigator and the family often results in the family realising they know a lot more about what happened than they initially thought; this enables them to share this information with the investigator. Interviews and questionnaires are employed repeatedly. The investigator's knowledge of the region, the communities and the history of the events that took place there during the war are crucial for success in discovering links between apparently unrelated events and provides important clues on where and whom to ask what questions. Furthermore, the presence of the investigator in the area allows him or her to establish a network of informers, including former soldiers, who provide first hand information on the events and contexts in which the children disappeared and help the investigator to find new clues.

The information gathered is compared with the information PRO-BUSQUEDA has compiled (and continues to compile) from the orphanages and other institutions. A team of volunteer university students, dedicated specially to this task, has documented over 40,000 files on children attended by institutions and orphanages during the eighties. This information is available in a database and may be compared with the information the relatives have provided of their case. PRO-BUSQUEDA has been able to look into all these files, including thousands of adoption files, because the Human Rights Defence Attorney has agreed to authorise the organisation's access.

15 PRO-BUSQUEDA's institutional investigative team has reviewed more then 35,000 files referring to children institutionalised during the Salvadoran civil war. PRO-BUSQUEDA keeps a database with all this information that can be cross-referred with the information provided by the families about their disappeared child.

16 The concept of family reunion is understood rather differently from the concept of family reunification in more conventional family tracing programmes: the intention is to reconnect the "child" with his or her family but not necessarily with a view to living with them. It is up to the various parties to renegotiate their relationship and pattern of contact.

When the clues multiply and the case comes close to resolution, the activities intensify. Relatives are kept up to date about the developments. When contact is made, the investigator speaks first with the adoptive/foster family (if existing), making clear PRO-BUSQUEDA respects them and their relationship with their children. The investigator evaluates the necessity of DNA testing and informs the relatives of the family of origin.

The experience of separation has marked the children's lives in many different ways. PRO-BUSQUEDA is not just searching for the missing child: it is also searching for a new and different person who may reconnect with a missing part of his or her personal history. It is crucial to take into account that, with few exceptions, between twelve and twenty years have passed since the child's disappearance. The person, who was then a child, is now an adolescent or a young adult. In those cases that are close to being solved and where a positive identification is required, PRO-BUSQUEDA performs DNA testing, with the help of Physicians for Human Rights.

In PRO-BUSQUEDA's investigative experience, some general patterns appear about what happened to the disappeared children. After their separation from their parents and relatives, the children generally went through many changes. Usually they were transferred first to a military base, and later to an orphanage, to a substitute home or an adoptive family. Some children were sent to different countries, with a different culture and language. The family separation marked a starting point for a new era in which the child's reference concepts and value systems were completely modified.

Some children were raised with families who gave them protection, love and care. Others grew up in places where they were victims of different types of abuse and exploitation. Some of the cases have demonstrated that the child's post-separation environment generated some kind of rejection towards his/her origins. This may be expressed through indifference, denial or lying to the child about his or her true origin, even when the child reached the teenage years. Similarly, some of the people and institutions involved in receiving and caring for the children after their separation often neglected to look for surviving relatives. Sometimes, the institutions involved preferred not to document the origins of the children, but rather facilitate adoption or institutionalisation. This fact explains the lack of cooperation of some organisations with PRO-BUSQUEDA's investigations.

Generally speaking, PRO-BUSQUEDA's search certainly has not had the cooperation it requires from many of the institutions involved, starting with the Armed Forces, who have not provided any of the information PRO-BUSQUEDA has repeatedly asked for. The Armed Forces have also refused to cooperate with the Salvadoran judicial system in the investigation of cases of disappeared children. Some of the numerous orphanages have cooperated with PRO-BUSQUEDA, but many, including the SOS institutions, have refused cooperation.

Many very interesting issues have come up over the years in PRO-BUSQUEDA's investigations. The following chapters will consider the experience of children while separated from their families. First, however, we want to highlight

some of the other issues that have arisen in PRO-BUSQUEDA's work, such as the role of the Salvadoran Red Cross and of the Attorney General with regard to disappeared children. Also, we take a closer look at the existing evidence for child trafficking and at a general analysis of the information of young people found through PRO-BUSQUEDA .

The Salvadoran Red Cross

Although the Salvadoran Red Cross did not provide long-term shelter for the disappeared children, it played a crucial role in some of the cases and this is described at some length because of the seriousness of their actions in some instances. The first PRO-BUSQUEDA contact with members of the Red Cross took place in June of 1994. Investigations with the Salvadoran Institute of Protection to Minors in the orphanages under its jurisdiction[17], indicated that, a few days after the May 1982 military operation, the Ladies Auxiliary of the Red Cross provided these children's homes with dozens of children from the Chalatenango conflict zone.

The PRO-BUSQUEDA investigator requested information from the group's secretary about possible disappeared children. She requested the investigator to come back on a different day, so that she could consult her superiors. When the investigator returned a few days later, he was allowed to take a look into a book of minutes of the Lady's Auxiliary meetings in 1982. The minutes of the Committee's meeting on June 16th, 1982, relate the following:

> *Our programme of counselling and attention to displaced persons has continued and grown in the department of Chalatenango. We have made five trips to Chalatenango with the respective permission of the administration and we have brought back 52 orphans, from recently born children up to twelve year olds. The rest are all little children. We have brought in a total of ten mothers with their children. This job has probably been the toughest we have had and thank God there have been enough ladies who cooperated and have had to bring the babies in their arms*

When asked about what had happened to these children after the Ladies Auxiliary had brought them to San Salvador, Mrs. Isabel Novoa[18] said they were placed in different orphanages, accompanied by a file card given to each child. She affirmed that the Salvadoran Red Cross had lost their copies of these cards and, for that reason, she could not provide any more information to PRO-BUSQUEDA. According to Mrs. Novoa, after placing the children in the orphanages, they were the government's responsibility, and ended the Red Cross's responsibility. However, at the Adalberto Guirola Children's Home, the 1982 entry book records that, after the Ladies Auxiliary put the children from Chalatenango in this institution, the group later transferred them to a different place.

17 The Adalberto Guirola Home for Children, the San Martin Children's Villages and other Salvadoran children's homes.

18 President of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Salvadoran Red Cross during 1982 and active member up to the present time.

This is illustrated by the case of brothers and sisters captured by members of the Armed Forces in the village Los Sitios de Arcatao, Chalatenango, on June 2nd, 1982, along with their parents. The Armed Forces assassinated the children's parents and took the four children by helicopter to their military headquarters in Chalatenango. The Ladies Auxiliary minutes of June 4th, 1982, affirms the following children were sent to the Adalberto Guirola Children's Home: Pablo L, 6 years of age; Francisca L, 15 months old and E N., 6 years old. The home's admission book registers the same children and also includes Marina L 3 years old, all four children deposited by the Salvadoran Red Cross. However, the same book shows that the Salvadoran Red Cross picked up all four children again from the Children's Home. The brothers Pablo and Emilio in July, 1982, Francisca in September 1982, and Marina on June 16, 1982. PRO-BUSQUEDA was able to trace that Pablo and Emilio were taken to the San Martin Children Villages and while staying in this children's home the Salvadoran Minor's Court put them up for adoption by French families. Even though no files are available, employees of the San Martin Children Villages attested that Marina also stayed in the children's home for a few days, until a woman arrived with a note from the Salvadoran Red Cross, stating she was the girl's "godmother" and she took the girl with her. The woman did not ask to see her brothers. In Francisca's case, PRO-BUSQUEDA has not been able to detect any trace of her anywhere, after the Salvadoran Red Cross picked her up from Adalberto Guirola Children's Home.

During a conversation with members of PRO-BUSQUEDA, Mrs. Novoa stated that, in 1982, the Ladies Auxiliary had brought no less than a hundred children from Chalatenango and that they had done similar kinds of work, but with smaller numbers of children, in other Departments, like Cuscatlán, Cabañas, La Paz and San Vicente. Mrs. Novoa said they had done this work at the request of the Armed Forces officials. The army called upon the Salvadoran Red Cross to go to the barracks and evacuate the children.

Another example of the Salvadoran Red Cross's role is the case of six children the army captured during a military operation in the village of El Perical, Tecoluca, in the province of San Vicente. The General Attorney's adoption files mention that the Salvadoran Red Cross placed the six children on June 23rd, 1981 in the Rosa Virginia Peletier Centre[19]. The document describes the investigation into the possibility of putting the children up for adoption. The Attorney General's social worker interviewed Mrs. Novoa in her capacity as the president of the Ladies Auxiliary. Mrs. Novoa stated that the children were picked up by military authorities and deposited in the Salvadoran Red Cross regional office in Zacatecoluca. Mrs. Novoa expressed that "in her personal opinion based on work experience, these children were probably orphans who were abandoned after armed confrontation". The Attorney General made no attempts to look for surviving relatives in the San Vicente province and authorised the children's adoption to foreign families.

The case of the L sisters proves that the Ladies Auxiliary role went beyond handing over the children to the corresponding government institutions.

19 Attorney General, Exp: 10-Ca-82, Social Report on adoption

According to one employee of the Red Cross, who did not want to be identified, some families connected with the Salvadoran Red Cross, adopted[20] children who came from conflict zones. The employee refused to provide PRO-BUSQUEDA with more detailed information. Francisca and Marina L remain disappeared up to this day. Obviously, genuine cooperation of the Salvadoran Red Cross, and specifically the Ladies Auxiliary, could help to establish the whereabouts of the L sisters and of other disappeared children.

The Attorney General and the Children's Personal Identity

PRO-BUSQUEDA has documented dozens of cases where the personal identity of children had been altered in different ways. Most of the disappeared children have false birth certificates, where all the information, including the information about the child's parents has been altered. In some of the cases the false birth certificates had the objective of appropriating children, functioning as a register or even as legal proof where the appropriators appeared as the biological parents of the child. The conscious alteration of the child's identity allowed the adoptive family to raise the child as if he or she was their biological offspring. In other cases the forging of a birth certificate took place when there was a need to establish or to present documentary proof of the child's identity to enter school. The adoptive family and even some orphanages solved this problem by getting a birth certificate in an illegal way that would allow the child to enter school.

The Republic's Attorney General is, by law, the legal representative of those children who because of any circumstance have lost the possibility of obtaining proof of their original identity. The Attorney General should have reviewed all the cases of loss of identity in the children separated from their families owing to the conflict. The Attorney General accomplished this task only with some of the children who went through the adoption system and in the case of two brothers who grew up in military headquarters (please see Chapter 8). In this case the Armed Forces asked for birth certificates for the children, the Attorney General provided them, without any further questions about the children's situation at the time of the request. The majority of cases of children who had lost their identity because of war-related situations never got to the Attorney General's attention. Most adoptive families and orphanages (and even lawyers, as we shall see in the section about adoptions) preferred getting a birth certificates directly, because they were easily obtained in different city or town halls throughout the country.

Had the disappeared children's adoptive families asked the Attorney General for the legal representation required by law, this would have resulted in a revision of the adoption process. Because they had not gone through a formal adoption process, a family risked being submitted to an evaluation related to the child's adoption, a procedure which included a psychological assessment, an economic evaluation and verification of the existence of any criminal record of the family members. This procedure could very well lead to the family being

20 These families would probably not follow a legal adoption procedure but take the children and register them as if they were their biological children.

rejected as adopters, resulting in the child's placement in an orphanage or assigned to another family. Also the procedure implied certain legal fees. So those families who knew about the legal steps for adoption, would generally prefer not to bother.

These anomalies were generated in the context of the civil war. Nevertheless, in the case of the disappeared children the changes in their identity still have relevant implications today. In the first place there are many children who live with an altered identity without knowing it. The modifications to the information about their origin hides the truth about their parents and their past, and, as a consequence, renders the reunion with their surviving relatives extremely difficult. This contravenes the child's rights to knowledge about his or her family, to family reunification and to a name and identity (CRC Articles 7, 8 and 10).

On the other hand, the disappeared children who have been able to recover their true identity through the identification of and reunion with their family of origin, have many problems with their legal documentation. Sometimes the children have as many as three different birth certificates. This situation generates all kinds of problems related to legal positions or transfers, such as marriage, sales and purchases, diplomas, permissions and licences. As an example we may mention the case of Andrea D whose actual birth was registered in Arcatao's town hall on May 2nd, 1975 by certificate number seventy-nine. The Salvadoran Army abducted the girl in a military operation on June 2nd, 1982. After her reunion with the family in January 1994, Andrea tried to obtain her original birth certificate. At first the municipal authorities of Arcatao said she was not registered. When PRO-BUSQUEDA checked the town's birth certificate registration book, certificate number seventy-nine of 1975 appeared but with other names in the spaces where the name of Andrea and her parents should be. Under the fresher ink of the new names one could still distinguish the original names, which had been coarsely eliminated with an eraser.

Evidence of Child Trafficking

The war debilitated the already weak Salvadoran government institutions even further. The separation between what could be a legally facilitated adoption and the illegal act of altering a child's identity became very thin. Because of the armed conflict, many children were "available", especially for those people who sought to profit from the children, arranging their adoptions with the sole motivation of making money.

The investigation into child trafficking has been difficult. Conscious of their act's criminal implications, the lawyers and other people involved in trafficking covered up the cases as much as they could. Child trafficking is characterised by a total elimination of the child's identity, which serves both to facilitate the adoption and to erase all the evidence of the child's illegal extraction. It is extremely difficult to reconstruct the identity of the children who were victims of this practice. Usually, the only people who could provide clues to the child's identity are those involved in the illegal transaction.

During the course of its investigations, PRO-BUSQUEDA has compiled evidence that links forced disappearance of children in military operations with a

network of child trafficking. PRO-BUSQUEDA reserves some of the information acquired on this issue, because of its legal implications. Nevertheless, we will give examples of some of the sources that offer proof of this practice.

In the US State Department's declassified documents about El Salvador in 1988 there is a paragraph referring to José Alfredo Jiménez, an officer of the infamous Atlacatl battalion that states

> *Jiménez is implicated in 1983 Salvadoran court documents as having snatched babies from the conflict zones to sell them for adoption*[21].

PRO-BUSQUEDA has been able to document that, in 1983, the National Police effectively broke into a children's "day-care centre" in San Salvador which, according to the news, was used for child trafficking. The centre was actually a residential centre used as a basis for the illicit trade in children. The Salvadoran authorities recovered a three-year-old boy called Carlos A R, who was put under the control of the Judge of Minors, Dr. Yolanda Meyers de Vásquez. The social worker assigned to the case gave the following information about this case:

> *The person who took care of the children, Mrs. Salazar, stated that she had received them from Mr. Rubén Alfonso del Cid Aguirre. He claimed to have received the children from Mrs. Marta Aracely Urrutia Martínez, the only person who is in prison in relation to this case… Mrs. Urrutia said she knew some of the children were stolen, but that Carlos A R was brought in from Palo Grande and that Major del Cid, member of the Atlacatl Battalion, picked him up after a military operation held in that place. She mentioned that the boy's real name is unknown, and that's why they named him Carlos A. The objective of the day-care centre was to look after the children while the lawyer Roberto Del Cid (brother of the aforementioned) made the illegal documents and sent them outside the country as "adopted" children, receiving between 15 and 20 thousand dollars for each child. Afterwards they would split the money*[22].

Allegedly, Mrs. Urrutia's was one of Del Cid's "scouts", a person who would actively and through illegal means obtain children for the lawyer to send for adoption. Her testimony shows that the practice of child trafficking had been committed for some time by the Del Cid brothers. No further investigations were made in this case. No further inquiries were made into Carlos's identity. That same year the Court of Minors arranged the child's adoption by a family in the US. Mrs. Urrutia served some time in jail. The Del Cid brothers were never prosecuted. The adoption records indicate that they continued to profit from this crime after this particular case had blown over.

PRO-BUSQUEDA has contact with many Salvadoran children "adopted" through the office of Mr. Del Cid or other lawyers, who desire to meet their biological family. PRO-BUSQUEDA has confirmed that the documentation used for the children's adoption was forged. The cases of children captured in the mil-

21 United States Embassy in El Salvador, October of 1988.
22 Second Court of Minors, San Salvador, file 36-A-12-83.

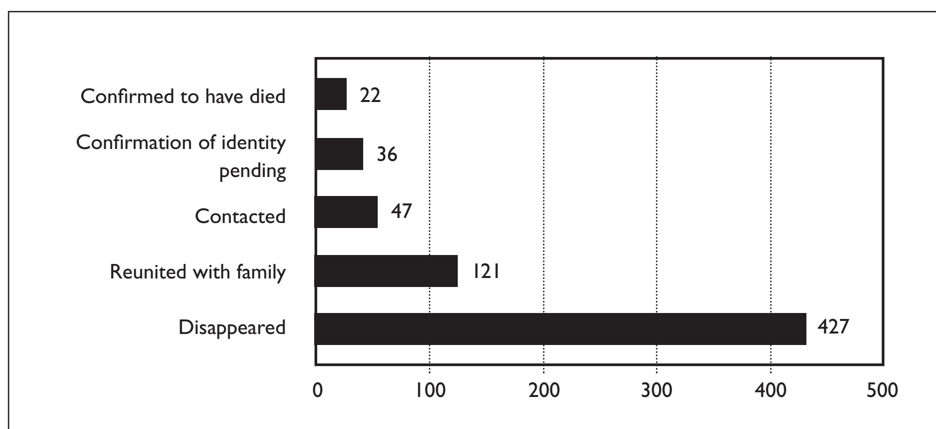
itary operations and sold into adoption are still under investigation. No single case has been solved so far. Even so, it has been confirmed that some of El Salvador's disappeared children were victims of this practice which is illegal and contravenes the CRC (Article 35).

The Statistics of PRO-BUSQUEDA's Investigation

PRO-BUSQUEDA has worked with a total of 653 cases of disappeared children. Through the search 204 children (now mainly young adults) have been located. 78% of the cases were referred to PRO-BUSQUEDA directly by the families of the disappeared children. The children themselves who were separated from their families also provide a significant number of referrals (4%), some of them known to be living outside of El Salvador. The cases referred by an independent source – newspapers, adoption files and others – forms the third category, referring 18% of the cases.

The disappearances mostly occurred during the early years of the war, with a peak in 1982. In 55% of the cases, the disappearance occurred directly as a result of the actions of the armed forces. In 38% of cases, the disappearance resulted from other consequences of the conflict (e.g. accidental separation), and in 6% of cases the disappearance was the responsibility of the FMLN. The remaining 1% of cases were disappearances resulting from the activities of the Honduran Army or the Security Corps of Guatemala.

Children's disappearance as a consequence of conflict has affected an almost equal number of boys and girls (51% and 49% respectively). In some cases the survivors of massacres have pointed out that there could have been "preferences" for boys on the part of those who took the children. According to some witnesses, the soldiers preferred to take boys, because they were the ones most likely to become guerrilla fighters when they grew up. However, a gender bias is not reflected in PRO-BUSQUEDA's statistics. The graph below reflects the current state of PRO-BUSQUEDA's investigations on the whereabouts of disappeared children. Even though important advances have been made, it becomes very clear that the largest group of cases is those who continue to be "disappeared".



As of May 2002, of a total of 204 located children (now mainly young adults), 87 had been the subject of international adoption while of the remaining 117 no exact figures were available of how many children were adopted into local families and how many grew up in orphanages and other institutions. Several children experienced more than one alternative care scenario and no clear case-by-case analysis had been made. However, it is estimated that of those 117 approximately 30 grew up mainly in orphanages and institutions while the remainder were subject to some kind of adoption or foster care.

4. Care Arrangements and the Methodology used to Explore them

An Introduction to Different Care Arrangements

The main focus of this case study is the care arrangements the children were subject to after the separation from their family. Although a number of publications have documented the work of PRO-BUSQUEDA, little information has been gathered until now on the alternative care the disappeared children received in the period of family separation; there have been no specific investigations or reports published on this subject. This aspect of the work was, however, of particular interest to the CPSC initiative, partly because of the unusual nature of some of the care arrangements experienced by disappeared children and the manner in which they were made, and partly because it provided an opportunity to bring together a group of young adults who were able to reflect on a large portion of their childhoods spent apart from their birth families.

The care arrangements experienced by the disappeared children have been divided into four main categories. The cases of children who were taken in by families are divided in two main groups: first, legal adoption in which a formal adoption process exists, usually involving adopters from overseas. The second category can variously be described as fostering, *de facto* adoption, or "appropriation". These cases are those in which the children are usually registered as the "biological" children of the adoptive parents. This phenomenon may be described as "adoption" insofar as the intention is permanent family membership, and though a legal device (birth registration) is used to formalise the relationship, the process can be described as *extra-judicial*, or occurring outside the ordinary course of legal proceedings[23]. The young people themselves usually describe their status as "adopted". Children who grew up in orphanages and children who grew up on a military base form the other categories of care for disappeared children.

The children PRO-BUSQUEDA works with are now mainly young adults who have been reunited with their birth families and usually are no longer living in the same family or care situation they were in while growing up: there are, however, several exceptions, especially in those cases where an adoption (formal or informal) took place. Each case is different and quite complex in itself.

Methodology

This case study was undertaken in two different phases (the first five weeks and the second twelve weeks long) between 2000 and 2002. The first phase consisted of a general compilation of the main issues around El Salvador's disappeared

23 Extra-judicial is defined in Collins English Dictionary (1994) as "outside the ordinary course of legal proceedings".

children, such as the context in which the family separation occurred, the scenarios or *modus operandi* of the Armed Forces and other groups involved in the disappearance of disappeared children, and PRO-BUSQUEDA's efforts in the fields of investigation, family reunions and mental health issues. The second phase of this case study focussed on the different care arrangements experienced by the separated children. While much of the information for the first phase was already available in different sources, mainly from PRO-BUSQUEDA, most of the information for the second phase was obtained directly from the young people and families involved.

The present case study is intended to look back on the whole experience of the phenomenon of disappeared children mainly through the eyes of the families and young people involved. This is especially true for the chapters on the different care arrangements, that constitute a compilation of these young people's experiences, often expressed in their own words. For these sections of this study, the voices of the families who lost their children are also brought into the picture.

As explained previously, after the child was separated from the family there were several different scenarios for his or her care. Often, the same child has experienced several of these scenarios. The following chapters centre mainly on the quality of the care the children received during their time away from their families. Some quantitative aspects have been included as well, although this has not been the study's primary orientation.

The main focus of this case study is on children who lived with Salvadoran families, covering as many young people as possible. Initially conceived as a smaller sample, a fairly large sample of children who grew up in orphanages is reflected, partially because of their accessibility and readiness to cooperate. The study also includes smaller samples of children reared in military bases and children adopted overseas. The rationale of this sampling frame is that there is already a great deal of information on the experience and outcomes of international adoption but very little is known about the experience of children who are spontaneously fostered (including those illegally adopted in El Salvador). There is also a great deal of evidence about the experience of children living in institutions (including the writings of the CPSC Research Co-ordinator).

The investigative team consisted of the author and two research assistants, one of them a young man reunited with his family through PRO-BUSQUEDA. The results of this team's inquiries were discussed and analysed by a small group of four young people, who are some of the most active in PRO-BUSQUEDA. The arrangements for the care and protection of these children were explored in some detail with the help of information from dozens of reunited young people and some adoptive families. Without their generous participation it would have been impossible to obtain valuable information on the issue of alternative care for El Salvador's disappeared children.

As explained earlier, the researchers focussed most of their work on the three most common alternative care categories: international adoption, "informal" adoption and orphanages. Of these three groups, the young people who had grown up in orphanages within El Salvador were the easiest to contact. In spite

of certain problems, the research also managed to contact a fair number of young people subject to "informal" local adoption. For international adoption the research had to be content with a smaller sample, also because of obvious logistic problems such as communication costs and language.

Interviews and surveys

A total of 21 young people and two adoptive families were extensively interviewed in El Salvador. A schedule focusing on the most important aspect of child care was used as a guide for the interviews, but as a rule additional questions were posed to address the different issues arising in the course of the interview, trying to obtain as much relevant information as possible and to "get to the bottom of things". Naturally, if limits were consciously or unconsciously indicated by those interviewed, these were respected. The first interviews were preformed by the author together with the assistant researcher who himself is one of the young people reunited with his family after the war. Most of the rest of the interviewing was done by this research assistant. The fact that he shared a common history with the young people he interviewed greatly helped him establish confidence and empathy.

One issue the researcher had not anticipated was that several of the participating youth had lived in different types of care arrangement and were able to supply valuable information on several categories of care. Of all of those young people interviewed or surveyed, 10 grew up mainly in orphanages or similar institutions, 8 grew up mainly with local informal adoptive families, 6 grew up with adoptive families abroad, and 2 grew up on an army base. All of those adopted abroad also experienced a period of at least one year in an orphanage. Also, of those who grew up primarily in orphanages, three spent periods of time with (informal) foster families. One of them actually had three foster families, two for a three month period each and one for as much as one year. All these different experiences are included and used for analysis in the following chapters.

The interviews were divided into two sections. One was a general conversation on the important events in the subject's life and the second part focused on the alternative care received during the family separation and was based on the questionnaire. Taking into account the general focus of the case study, some of the subjects who had some of the most colourful and interesting histories were later interviewed to obtain the necessary material for the compilation of a life story, and five of the young people have been interviewed more extensively for this purpose. These life stories allow the reader to have a more comprehensive view on how the different events marked the young people's lives in different ways. Also, these stories eloquently show the resources they employed to survive and adapt under adverse and emotionally complex circumstances.

Five of the adopted children who still live abroad, but who have already been to El Salvador to meet their birth family, responded to a survey over the phone and by mail and audio cassette. Also, two adoptive families in the United States and one in Belgium agreed to fill out a survey specifically designed for adoptive families over the internet. Additional information was provided by a young man

who grew up in France but currently lives in El Salvador. He was interviewed with an adapted version of the regular interview format and also agreed to collaborate with his life story.

Workshop

In order to create a larger forum for discussion about the care arrangements during family separation, the investigative team organised a workshop. Unfortunately, only 9 of the 16 young people who had been invited, attended. Of those attending, 6 had grown up in orphanages, 2 with (local) adoptive families and one had experienced both. However, the discussions and the contributions made during the workshop supplied valuable additional material for the case study. The entire workshop was tape-recorded and transcribed.

Apart from an introductory and concluding session, the investigative team decided to divide the workshop into three sections:

- The advantages and disadvantages of the alternative care arrangements
- The best and the worst experiences
- The resources used to cope with all the difficulties.

In the first exercise, the discussion was triggered by the Spanish saying *"no hay mal que por bien no venga"* which is loosely translated as "even the worst events may also bring some positive things". The discussion allowed the young people to envisage the advantages and disadvantages of the family separation, what their life might have been like had they not been separated from their family etc. They used colour cards and markers to write different advantages and disadvantages and each one of the participants taped the cards on the wall, while commenting with the group what they had written and why. For the second exercise the young people used drawings to express what they considered to be the best and worst experiences while separated from their family. The drawings were shared and discussed in pairs and later in the group. Finally, the third exercise used was called "I am strong". Each of the participants drew the outline of their hand (a symbol of strength) on a blank sheet of paper and then wrote (or drew) for each finger and thumb things to represent a particular strength that they used to cope with their situation. Participants then shared their diagrams and discussed how they coped with adversity.

Group discussions

A group of some of PRO-BUSQUEDA's most active young people were involved in a more intensive way in the process of analysis of the material for this case study. As these young people had already been participating with PRO-BUSQUEDA in many activities, including the writing of a book about their experiences[24], they had a keen sense of their own reality and of that of the other young people involved in PRO-BUSQUEDA. Their insights, views and com-

24 "Historias para Tener Presente" – "Stories to Bear in Mind" – will be published by UCA in 2002.

ments constitute an expert opinion which was taken into account in the different sections of this case study.

The four young people who participated in this group (including the research assistant) also participated in the interviews and the workshop. In the course of two meetings, the main issues of the interviews and the workshop were shared and commented upon. Special attention was paid to the information on the children who grew up with informal adoptive families.

Additional material

Apart from the analysis of the material gathered specifically for this case study, the author has used other sources of information such as different PRO-BUSQUEDA year reports, articles, existing interviews with families and young people who have been traced, and his own work notes[25]. Nevertheless, the main content of this case study originates in the interviews, surveys, workshop and group discussions.

Reflections on Participation

Notably, it has been much easier to be able to obtain the collaboration of children who grew up in orphanages or institutions than children who grew up with adoptive families, both formal international adoption and informal local adoption. In the case of local adoptive families, this is especially true if the adoptive family is middle class. Sometimes the reluctance to collaborate with PRO-BUSQUEDA stems from the adoptive family and sometimes from the child him or herself or both parties.

Another difficulty in the fieldwork for this study is related to the dynamic lives of those involved. Sometimes it is necessary to "trace" the children again in order to contact them, because they have moved, married etc. Telephone is often not available, making communication difficult. After the initial identification process and the family reunion, when PRO-BUSQUEDA's involvement is normally very intense, the young people's continued contact with PRO-BUSQUEDA depends largely on his or her willingness and ability to attend the meetings and activities organised for them. PRO-BUSQUEDA's reunification programme almost never implies legal bonds, as there are no courts involved in the bulk of the family reunification cases. The young people involved participate on a mostly voluntary basis and the same is true for adoptive families and birth families[26], although the latter almost always respond to any call PRO-BUSQUEDA makes. PRO-BUSQUEDA's experience with young people in adoptive families reflects how difficult an issue it is to cope with the sudden presence of a birth family, for both the child in question as well as his or her adoptive family. Also other, more practical, issues may cause non-attendance at PRO-BUSQUEDA activities, such as work, school etc.

25 The author of this case study has worked with PRO-BUSQUEDA from 1994 onward

26 The exception lies in a handful of cases that have been presented to court. In these cases, a judge may play a role in the family reunification process.

It is important to emphasise that alternative care during the family separation is by no means an issue only of the past. Even though the young people we interviewed have all found their missing families, the alternative care scenario is also still a part of their lives, often a more present one than the biological family since the reunion, as it continues not only to determine but also to complicate their self-image and their social relations. The investigators have only been able to scratch the surface of these numerous very emotionally charged and complex issues. Also, this is the main reason why it has not been easy to find volunteers for the interviews. Many of the young people have been reluctant to maintain more close contact with their birth family and with PRO-BUSQUEDA and hardly ever attend other PRO-BUSQUEDA activities. A more profound exploration into the issues treated in this study would require not only considerably more time and resources, but also a specific strategy of establishing closer bonds with the young people and possible long term psychological treatment.

5. Children Brought up in Residential Institutions

According to several sources, no less than 50 orphanages functioned in El Salvador during the period of conflict. At the time, some of the residents were there because of the "customary" reasons, such as the child abuse or family disintegration. However, during the eighties, most of the children were admitted to these homes because of the armed conflict. An indicator of this fact is that, when the conflict ended, most orphanages closed, and the children who were resident there during the war then went to live with their families or independently.

In the last three years PRO-BUSQUEDA's investigation team, along with the Human Rights Defence Attorney, has reviewed an important part of the files of the orphanages that functioned during war. This work has confronted serious limitations, the main one being the poor condition or, in some cases, the complete absence of documentation.

In the orphanage Rosa Virginia Peletier, one of the main government-run centres that functioned during the conflict, the home's records for the years 1980 to 1985 consist of a bundle of papers completely torn and unreadable, which contain only a few legible entries with names and dates. Workers of the institution said that the book was in that condition because they had not received funds to buy a new book[27]. In the Adalberto Guirola orphanage no individual files are available on the children admitted during the eighties. The only documentation is a registration book with the admissions and discharges of children, with very little information about the origins and characteristics of each child. Other orphanages, such as, Hogar Goreti of Santa Ana, claim to have no documentation of their work during that time.

To give children up for adoption to foreign families was a common practice in some orphanages. The Judges for Minors and the General Attorney arranged the adoptions. This procedure is explained in detail later in chapter 6. Some of the children were not adopted from the orphanages because they were too old to be given up for an international adoption. Places like Aldeas Infantiles (an SOS children's village[28]) or the Oscar Arnulfo Romero Community, the Archbishop's orphanage located in Zaragoza, La Libertad, offered long term institutionalisation as an alternative to adoption:

> *When they took me I thought they would take me to a family, but they took us to the military headquarters in Sensuntepeque, there they gave us sweets and toys and we forgot everything else. Afterwards they took us to an orphanage. There were 7 other children there, but we didn't know anyone. We were there for a few months and we lived isolated in the same house. They brought more children to the house. The Red Cross brought them. And that's how the house was filled with kids, and that's where we stayed until we finished school*

27 Lack of financial resources was and is a serious problem in most government institutions. However, the funds required to buy a blank notebook are obviously not a big element in the general budget. The argument reflects the lack of importance given to the child's identity and background.

28 SOS Children Villages, an international organisation based in Austria.

When necessary, the orphanage would obtain basic documentation for the children who had arrived without any. Usually the child's caretaker would go to a nearby municipal office to get a birth certificate. This person would invent information about the child's identity, such as last name, mother's name, place of birth etc. in order to receive a birth certificate and to be able to enrol the child in school, or, in some cases, to put the child up for adoption.

Some of the disappeared children who grew up in orphanages, kept their own name, but their date of birth, place of origin and parents' names were changed. The smallest children usually suffered a total change of their legal identity. PRO-BUSQUEDA found evidence of this practice in the Comunidad Oscar Arnulfo Romero (COAR), Aldeas Infantiles (SOS) and Villas Infantiles San Martín[29].

The changed identity has made the search for disappeared children very difficult. The consequences of this alteration of names would not be as serious if an adequate register had existed, with a brief personal history of each child. Another serious deficiency in most of the orphanages' files is the lack of reference to the reasons for admission. Because of changed names and untraceable origins, PRO-BUSQUEDA's investigators rely on very little information to search for the disappeared children among the thousands of children who passed through the orphanages during the eighties.

So far, PRO-BUSQUEDA has identified 14 disappeared children, now youths, while they were living in different orphanages of the country. Most of them are progressing towards a more independent life. In this process some rely on the support of the institutions they grew up in and, since the reunion with their family of origin, with their support also. Other children who grew up in orphanages have not had enough support and have faced, before and after the reunion with their family, extreme poverty, drugs, gangs and violence.

For the purpose of this case study, 10 young people who had experienced institutional care were interviewed and eight were involved in a workshop discussion. It was found that they were more willing to talk about their experience than the other children brought up in families – not because their experiences were less difficult, but because talking about their history posed less of a existential problem to them than in the case of those who grew up in an adoptive family. Most of the young people had left the orphanages and did not feel bound to the institution in any way. Although a few exceptions are known, most of them have accepted their biological family rapidly and have developed a positive relationship with them. Although not the largest group numerically, they are also the most active in PRO-BUSQUEDA, a high percentage assisting in mental health workshops and other meetings.

Circumstances of Placement

In the early eighties the existing Salvadoran orphanages were, literally, flooded with children. Many existing orphanages adapted the criteria for accepting children to the circumstances of the war and many enlarged their facilities, applied for additional funding etc. Dozens of other orphanages were set up in different parts of the country: the founders were religious groups and other organisations,

29 Villas Infantiles San Martín is a government-run orphanage

such as the Lawyers Wives' Association and similar groups. The two largest groups, however, were the orphanages run by one or another branch of the Catholic Church and the government operated institutions. The government would also regularly delegate the operation of the public children's home to religious bodies.

After the dramatic events that caused the family separation, usually church or relief workers, Red Cross or members of the insurrection movement placed the separated children in these different institutions. Sometimes, adoptive or foster families would receive the children after a period of time. Although the army was directly responsible for most of the family separations, soldiers or officials hardly ever placed the children into an institution or an orphanage themselves, generally leaving this task to Red Cross workers, hospital personel, etc.:

The same soldiers who killed my father, picked me up from the ground and took me to a (military) camp. In the camp there were many more children, they fed us and they guarded us. I slept in that camp. The next day they put us on a helicopter and took us away. I thought they were going to kill us, to throw us out of the helicopter. From the camp they took us to the military base and from there to the Red Cross installation. There a doctor examined us and they got us clothes. From then on they put this idea in our heads that our parents had been killed because they were guerrillas and that we were all alone in this world. They wouldn't let us speak to anyone because we were the children of the guerrillas. They told us they were going to take us to a place where they would give us everything we needed. That place was "Aldeas Infantiles" (SOS)

The children who fell into the hands of the Red Cross or government authorities were likely to be placed in either one of the government institutions or in one of the more government- oriented private homes. Both guerrilla fighters and civilian supporters would send away children to safer places, as the area they were in became increasingly caught up in the conflict. Some progressive church groups set up children's homes catering for these children as well as for those from displaced families facing extreme poverty and other circumstances related to the war:

> *Just before my father died he made me promise that I would leave the volcano (the guerrilla front) and that I would live with the person they (the guerrilla movement) would send to pick me up. You see, almost all of my family had been killed and my father did not want me to stay behind with my older brother, because it was dangerous. In effect, a lady came to pick me up, maybe two weeks later. She took me to her house, then I stayed with another family for a couple of months, then she came to pick me up again and placed me with a different family. They were the ones who decided to take me to the orphanage. We went by car, arrived, and the man (the foster father) talked to the priest in charge. It was all arranged in five minutes*

Asking questions was often impossible or considered dangerous and, in other accounts, not deemed necessary by the relief workers. Often, the orphanages had very little information about the children they were taking care of. The country was in crisis and priorities in the homes were food and health care, rather than

laying the foundations for future family reintegration or preserving the child's family identity.

Material Conditions

Generally, the material conditions offered to the children in the orphanages were acceptable. The children themselves, those old enough to remember, looked upon entering the orphanages as terminating a time of scarcity and suffering. Material conditions did vary greatly from one institution to the next, as the institution's economic well-being depended largely on the amount of aid they were able to obtain from abroad[30]:

> *We can't complain. We had health and education. We were well fed. In that sense, nothing was lacking in Aldeas Infantiles*

The young people especially appreciated the opportunities they had to go to school, college and in several cases even university – opportunities they believe they would not have had if they had stayed with their families:

> *Now that I have met some relatives of a similar age, I noticed that they didn't get to study as much as I did. This really helped me. They (the people from the orphanage) gave me a great opportunity. It is a great advantage to know how to read and write. I didn't get very far in my studies, but that is not their fault; it was my fault not to seize the opportunity*

In several cases the children arrived in the orphanages not only in a deplorable general health condition, but even wounded by bullets or shrapnel. The two cases documented of war-disabled children placed in government institutions were both sent into adoption quite rapidly and received medical care abroad. In one case, a child sponsored by an institution did receive extensive medical attention and, as a result, she was eventually able to walk again.

> *What I am most grateful for to Aldeas Infantiles is for helping me to walk again. When the Red Cross took me to Aldeas my left arm was missing and I was not able to walk at all, only to crawl. I had two operations on my hip and leg and years of rehabilitation, but I eventually managed to walk quite well*

Only one of those interviewed stated that the material conditions in the orphanage had been far from ideal, in this case a government-run institution:

> *The springs in the bunk beds we slept in were so noisy it was hard to sleep at night; gifts only around Christmas. For a while I had no shoes and walked around barefooted. I had to ask the (adoption) lawyers for clothes, because they wouldn't give me any. Also, the cleanliness was horrible. The children wetted the beds, it smelled*

30 The government-run institutions, however, did not depend on foreign funding.

Another case that raised questions about the sanitary conditions in the orphanages is that of Carlos M G M. When this child died in a hospital, five other children from the same government-run orphanage[31] died in the same week, all of the same cause, which seems to have been an infection of the digestive system. Adalberto Guirola had a policy of promoting adoption for their residents; none of the children found by PRO-BUSQUEDA actually grew up in this institution.

Emotional and Affectionate Conditions

> *In one's family, even if it is just a boiled egg, but they give it to you with love. In an institution, it's a different story*

The young people's appreciation of the emotional and affectionate conditions of their care in the institutions was unanimously negative. The positive aspects mentioned centred on safety and protection:

> *We came from a very unsafe place, with war, with bombs. The children's home was a haven, a very nice place, surrounded by gardens, lots of children. This fulfilled the necessity a child has for safety, for security. We felt protected, even though the void our parents left was not filled*

The children had all been through extremely traumatic experiences, including those that generated the family separation. During the first few months, if they would see soldiers near the orphanage or hear aeroplanes, the children would instinctively hide. Many had psychological disorders, some suffered from amnesia, anxiety etc. Only in a few orphanages was psychological care offered. The young people evaluated it had helped them very little, voicing a generally negative opinion about therapy:

> *They would send us to a clinic to talk to psychologists, but we all hated going*

The quality of the psychological care may have been a factor in children's reaction, as some of the main intervention techniques used seemed to have been to simply tell the children to forget about their past experiences:

> *They took me to therapy and they told me I should try to forget everything – it wasn't fair that I was going to have to remember these things for the rest of my life; it was going to damage my brain, it was going to damage my future, my career; and I told them: "How can I forget this? Could you forget your own child's death?"*[32]

During the workshop, the consensus of those who had been in orphanages was

> *We all lacked love*

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31 At the time Adalaberto Guirola was a government-run orphanage, whose operation was delegated later to a religious group

32 See Life Story of Vitelio

This was contrasted with the fact that they had all received adequate nutrition, healthcare and education:

> *We never had any affection; we had all the material things; a bed, food, clothing; but we never had love*

> *They gave us all we needed... To me it was exciting, because I couldn't hear the bombs any more, I didn't have to sleep in the rain; but also it was sad, I was far away from the place I was born*

The people who were supposed to fulfil a parental role in the institutions, usually had too many children to take care of to be able to attend to the children's emotional needs:

> *We lacked affection and understanding from those who took care of us, because in the homes there were many children. Sometimes they would only hear us, but they would not listen to us or understand us. Often, when a child was feeling sad or depressed, they didn't know why, nor would they ask us. There were so many children with whom to share the little affection available, that there was no individualised affection for any of us*

> *We called the director (of the SOS institution) "Daddy", but how was he going to be a father for over one hundred children? Besides, he was always occupied with administrative things, always busy; even though he tried to be a good example to the children, he really had little time for us*

In aspects of affection, all of the young people who participated in the workshop and/or the interviews viewed the care in the institution as of lesser quality than the care they would have received from their own families.

> *We all went through the same thing. We didn't know what a mother's love was like; or a father who gives himself to his son or daughter, and even if he has many children loves them all the same. We didn't know what that was. In the orphanages, the substitute mothers could not give us the love of a true mother. We didn't have our parents' care and that is something terrible. We would have really wanted to have it, even if they were starving poor, we would have wanted to have the care that each child deserves*

> *Even though I stayed with people who loved me, they never were able to fill the space of a true family. They showed affection for us, but when you are a child and you have problems of any kind, you always want someone to help you. So, then you find that true family warmth is missing*

Some of the orphanages, such COAR and Aldeas Infantiles, placed children in small groups with a female caretaker, simulating a family structure. Others had a more traditional institutional approach with large dormitories etc. Except for those in Villas Infantiles, the rest of the young people rendered a more

favourable view of the smaller unit model. Lucio C experienced both models and he compares the two in the following fashion:

> *COAR was a nice place for children, the place was huge and a lot of land surrounded the houses we stayed in. With the other children in the house we would team up against the children from the other houses and we would compete for the affection of the woman taking care of us. All in all, I think it was a good place. On the other hand, the Hogar Magaña was very different. That place seemed more like a prison than a home for children. Everything was very strict, we all had to get up at the same time in the morning, we all had to eat together, without saying a word. If you spoke, you'd be punished. Yes, physical punishment. I really felt awful in this place*

Abuse and Exploitation

According to the young people, physical and emotional abuse took place in all of the institutions, with the difference that in some it was almost like a policy, while in others certain caretakers committed "excesses". Some of these excesses are likely to have taken place without the approval or the knowledge of the institution's management. The young people generally do not see physical punishment as inappropriate unless the punishment is too frequent or too harsh:

> *They punished us too often. When someone had done something bad, they put us all in a line and you had to be careful not to lift your head, because if they saw you they would beat you with a stick. They would hit us hard*[33]

As affective care was scarce, children frequently felt ignored by staff:

> *When they were in a good mood, they would take you into account, but when not, they wouldn't. Now it has improved a lot, but before it was different, before they would ignore you all the time*

Curiously, one of the worst cases of abuse was documented in Aldeas Infantiles SOS, one of the private institutions that, paradoxically, usually provided some of the best care for the children. This is a case of a woman in charge of one of the units of the institution who became very abusive with the children under her responsibility, especially with one of them. Once the children mustered up enough courage to talk to the director of the institutions about how they were being treated, the woman was fired:

> *This woman treated me very badly. My first memory is from when I was two or three. I remember struggling in the water. The woman was trying to hold me down in the water to drown me. I don't know how come I didn't choke to death. She would beat me all the time. Another thing she did to me that I remember clearly was when she turned on the electric stove waited for it to heat up and then sat me down on top of the glowing coil. I still have the spiral marks*

33 See life story of Emiliano

There were individual cases of abuse, such as the one described above, and collective ones. In one case, an orphanage run by Catholic nuns even called upon the Armed Forces to discipline the children, a very unhealthy decision, especially considering that, during the war, the army had victimised many of the children present and that was the reason they were in the orphanage to begin with:

> *On a Sunday we were eating chicken and one of the children dropped a tortilla on the floor. I don't know whether he did it on purpose. Mother Superior noticed and asked who had done it. Nobody answered. She told the children's instructor to go to the military base and ask the colonel to lend her a soldier. They had us out on the field all afternoon, exercising while getting terribly sunburnt. After a few hours some of the children started to cry, but the soldier wouldn't stop making us exercise. Finally, one of the children said that he had done it, just so that it would stop. He hadn't really done it, he just couldn't take it any more*

The strongest feeling manifested by the young people around the subject of abuse was that of impotence, of feeling defenceless, of not being able to do anything about it. As they were separated from their family and had no idea where they were, they would not be able to go back to them or complain to them. This would sometimes be explicitly used to intimidate the children:

> *I didn't know what to do. I wanted to leave, I wanted to shout, but as I was under their domination, I just had to be quiet about it. I cried a lot. Without any cause, I would be corrected or insulted. As I did not have the permission to speak, I had to settle for my tears. There was no joy. The woman who took care of me would beat me. She'd grab me by the hair, lift me up and swing me around as if I was a* piñata[34]*. I couldn't tell her anything because I was still a child and if I had reacted maybe she would have beaten my teeth out with a stick. These women crossed the line. They would beat us with sticks, they would put large rocks on our heads, and they would beat us even with the iron, with no clothes on, no! They liked us to be naked (in order to beat us). They really went too far*

Also, in some government-oriented orphanages the fact that the children came from families who were in opposition to the government would be used against them:

> *The ladies would tell us: "We have to take care of you little rascals while your mother is living it up with the guerrillas". The woman I spend most time with hurt me really badly one time when she told me that my mother was a great whore, and that she had left because she preferred to be with the guerrillas*[35]

The same youth also remembered:

> *They were very strict with us because they were with the government, not with the campesinos. I remember that when I sang the songs I had learned with my*

34 A suspended balloon filled with sweets for parties

35 See Life Story Vitelio

family, revolutionary songs, they would tell me "Don't sing that trash", and they would beat me with a stick[36]

Best and Worst Moments

The inventory of the best and worst moments the children who were brought up in orphanages went through sheds some light on the hardship they experienced. At first the vast majority of them referred to the family reunion as the best moment. When asked to look for a best moment between the family separation and the family reunion, it took the young people considerably longer to come up with an answer. The best moments they eventually put forward were, almost without exception, those moments in which a particular individual celebration was dedicated to them; a graduation, a birthday party or a celebration. It was obviously hard for the children to make themselves noticed as individuals in the orphanages, because of the very limited number of caretakers and the large number of children:

> *One of the best moments was when I won a medal in the institution, because of being the leading scorer (of the tournament). It was unforgettable*

The element of recognition, as an individual or as a group, was extremely important for the children; regrettably, this occurred too seldom:

> *I liked Christmas very much, because they would often beat me, but not at Christmas. I would have a good time at the party*

Others referred to being able to participate in sports as some of their best moments:

> *When I went to play football with the kids, those were my best moments, because they were the only time I could release the pressure*

One of the young people proposed the feeling of being accepted by other children in the same situation as her best moment:

> *My best moment at the orphanage was as follows; I had not been there for very long and I was crying all the time. A little girl came walking up to me and said: "Don't cry, I am your sister". Perhaps that was the best moment because I have always wanted to have a sister and I loved that girl as if she were my sister ever since. It was the best moment of my life*

Other replies included:

> *I had no good moments*
>
> *When I found someone who was going to take care of me and I was able to leave the orphanage. Too bad it only lasted for one year*

36 Idem.

The worst moments described referred principally to the abuse described before and to moments of desolation:

> *Loneliness. I felt I needed my family, even though I always had other people around me. And I thought my family had been killed*

The constant presence of other children would alleviate some of the feelings of loneliness, but there were certain emotional aspects related to the interaction with caretakers that could not be fulfilled by the other children.

The worst experience was described by a youth who got involved with street gangs while he was growing up in the orphanage:

> *I was in jail like 27 times. It was a bad place to be. But I wasn't in there because I was up to any good. No, I had taken a bad road. They beat me up once and left my chest all battered. I couldn't get up for 3 days. It was hard, being in jail without being able to stand up. And all this because I got involved with the youth gangs*[37]

Perceptions of Care

The young people agreed that within the institutions there had been little favouritism towards any specific children; generally all had been treated the same. As discussed earlier the institutions basically employed two different organisational schemes for the children. One was the smaller unit with a caretaker as a mother figure and another was the traditional model of large dormitories and long dinner tables. The former quality of care depended largely on the person responsible on a day-to-day basis for the children, while the latter was a system based on the enforcement of more authoritarian regimes.

In the small unit models the (almost always female) caretakers were usually referred to as "aunt" or "mother":

> *We grew up in the house number five*[38]*; several "mothers" passed through our house. At first we called them "mothers", but later "aunts". But none actually gave the love of a mother. Maybe some of them did well and others didn't; we don't know. But we didn't feel they could give us what we wanted*

Often the children did not feel comfortable with the names they had to use for the people taking care of them, but they had to follow the rules:

> *In the beginning they*[39] *made me call the responsible (person) "Mother", but now I prefer to call her by her name, because it is no good kidding yourself*

> *There were ten different houses and in each one there would be one woman we had to call "mother" and one woman we had to call "aunt". It was so hard. I used to try to avoid calling this woman "mother" because I couldn't bring myself*

37 See Life Story Vitelio
38 SOS children's home
39 Another SOS children's home

to it. I remember on Mother's Day we had to sing them a song in which we called her "mother" and I said to myself: "How hard it is to sing this! How difficult to make it come from the heart!"[40]

In the children's village type of home it would be common to have a male figure, like the director or similar, to play a "father" role for the children. In at least one case, more than one hundred children growing up in the orphanage called the director "Daddy". In the more old fashioned institutions caretakers would usually be addressed with the Spanish equivalents of "Sir" and "Miss", or by their religious title.

As discussed earlier, the amount of time available for each child was very limited and this influenced heavily how they perceived and evaluated the care received. Apart from this, the young people also professed the care to be of a different quality from the care they would have received from their birth family:

They didn't take care of me like my family would have. When you don't have your family near, nobody stands up for you. While one's mother says "leave him with me", other people don't care at all. So the woman who took care of me at the orphanage, she treated me as a piece of dirty cloth

The (religious) sisters were not bad and not really good either. Average, I would say. I would get by. And the sisters would be occupied with their own things. There was one sister who took care of us; she was nasty. She would always ignore me. I didn't really suffer, but I didn't have a good time either

The young people distinguished two phases in their attitudes towards the people who took care of them; the childhood and the adolescent years. During the latter, often the relationship with staff would grow more tense and complicated. The teenagers did not accept the different forms of punishment imposed on them; they started to question those same rules they had obeyed before. As the children's consciousness about their situation grew, insecurity about what would eventually become of them increased. Other teenage children were often no longer allowed to stay in the orphanage or were expelled because of their behaviour, even if they had nowhere to go. The institutional support for making the step from adolescence to independence was either very deficient or was conditioned on the child's behaviour, school reports etc. In some institutions (including SOS) only the exemplary youth were to be favoured by the institution with prolonged economic support. All of this created a lot of insecurity in the young people as they were growing up:

I always had this idea in my head. Now they[41] *give me everything here, food, clothing, school; but what will happen in a couple of years? Other kids had to leave the orphanage and sometimes they had nothing to fall back on. I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to fend for myself. Imagine, no money, sixteen or seventeen years old, not even finished high school: how was I going to survive?*

40 See Life Story Vitelio
41 A private children's village type of home related to the Catholic Church

The institutions were often more prepared to deal with children rather than with teenagers. Teenagers felt oppressed as they had to follow the same rules as the smaller children and the institutions often had difficulties handling normal teenage behaviour:

> *I wanted more freedom, but they wouldn't give me that. They said it was a bad example for the other children. But I was just a normal teenage girl. I started having boyfriends; I started to hang out with friends outside of the orphanage. That was when the situation became more tense and they began complaining about me all the time*[42]

> *Because I smoked with my friends outside of the institution, they always complained about me, they always said bad things about me. They talked badly about my friends too, as if they were the lowest. Then they wrongly accused me of showing the smaller children in our home how to smoke. It was one of the main reasons they kicked me out*[43]

The young people identified with this example, as they also had felt threatened that the institution could always kick them out. They claimed that one of the big differences between growing up with a family, even if it is adoptive, and growing up in an institution is the sensation that from one day to another they could have found themselves all alone in the world. The more individual emotional bonds that could prevent this from happening even if they behaved badly, did not exist.

Some of the youth got involved with street gangs during their teenage years. Vitelio's life story offers an account of this. During the workshop, he expressed why the gangs had been so attractive to him, more attractive than the orphanage he grew up in:

> *The gangs knew how to win me over by offering a kind of love that was like that of brothers. At least I thought so at the time. They supported me always; when I felt bad, they offered me drugs to relieve my sorrows. At the orphanage, the adults were in charge and I hated them, because they put me down. In the gangs, we were all in charge. They made me feel strong*

Identity

Unlike the children who lived in adoptive families, those who grew up in orphanages felt an overwhelming sense of being an orphan. The young people argued that the word "orphan" implied a whole series of negative assumptions that would make people look down on them, such as that they had been abandoned, they had no relatives and no one to protect them and even that they were not to be trusted:

42 SOS children's home
43 SOS children's home

At school, on the streets, even in the institution, they would always treat us like orphans. This made us feel bad inside. When school was out, all the children went running to their parents, but not us. Nobody would pick us up. We had to walk back, together, in a group, back to the orphanage. And the people would stare at us as we walked by. "There go the orphans…" they would say

We always felt humiliated because of living in the home. I remember that whenever we walked from the institution towards the school the people sent signals to each other all across the block. "Here come the orphans!" They would rapidly put everything inside (their houses), everything we could take with us. People thought we were all juvenile delinquents or something

Even if the children were cared for by people who appreciated them, the fact they were classified by society as orphans did affect the way they viewed themselves. One of the participants in the workshop offered the following explanation:

Not being with my (biological) family made me feel less than others. At school they teach you what a family is and someone like me wouldn't know what to think or do. We just sat there like "too bad, we don't have a family, there is nothing we can do". I always felt it was a great disadvantage not to have my family

Even inside the institutions, the young people perceived differences. There were the children who had some family members who would visit them from time to time, and those, usually a smaller group, who had no relatives to visit them whatsoever:

In the institutions we felt less bad about being orphans, but still… We didn't have any relatives to come and visit us, and most of the other children did, so we felt more orphans than they felt. Not as bad as we felt outside, in society, but still, we felt bad

One youth, who grew up in the SOS institution, stated that the staff would tell them to forget about their families:

Don't talk about what happened, it will only do you more harm. Don't think about your family, they are guerrillas, they are dead

It is clear that many of the institutions not only did not understand the importance of children retaining a positive image of their own families, but even after the reunion with their parents, contact was discouraged. In an SOS institution, for example, family contact was discouraged and children were encouraged to forget about their families. One mother, with whom her son had eventually been reunited, stated she was dismissed by the staff because she was "too poor". It is also clear that this institution concealed the presence of other children from PRO-BUSQUEDA and was unwilling to cooperate with their efforts to reunite children with their families.

Most of the children placed in the orphanages did not grow up with their own given name but with an identity invented for them by someone in the institu-

tion. Many of them did not know what their given name was until they were reunited with their relatives:

> *At the (Villas Infantiles San Martín) orphanage they only knew my first name. They made a big confusion of my name. First they gave me the last name of one of the women who took care of me. They got me a birth certificate that was phoney. A couple of years later, I don't know why, but they changed my name again, this time they gave me an additional first name as well; and another birth certificate. I asked myself if it was always going to be like that, if they could change my name whenever they wanted to? When I introduced myself to someone I didn't even know what to say any more*

Only some of the older children, preserved their full given name, but all the rest lost at least the last name, and often the first name as well:

> *I arrived at Aldeas (SOS) with no papers. Because of another girl who knew my name they called me "Andrea". If she hadn't been there God knows what name they would have given me. The last name they put on my birth certificate was completely different from my real last name. I felt badly because I only had one last name on my birth certificate. At school they explained that only children with no father had only one last name; that made me feel worse*

Even though the issue of the true (given) name is often resolved with the family reunion, sometimes a lack of clarity about the exact date or place of birth remains; especially in those cases where the mother was killed, the family was not around when the child was born and the child was not registered, or the registers had been destroyed in the war. Armando A's words manifest some of the apprehension provoked by these uncertainties.

> *I consider myself to be younger than the 27 years that I am supposed to be. Who knows when they got me stuck with this age: when they (the soldiers) grabbed me, when the Red Cross took me or in the orphanage. I think the bastards just decided to make me a couple of years older. It is something that happened and now, what can I do about it?*

Unlike the adopted children, many of those who grew up in orphanages have renounced the name that was given to them following the family separation and have reverted to the name given to them by their birth families. PRO-BUSQUEDA has helped them to arrange the paperwork to make this formal identity change possible. But it is not just a matter of the name in itself. The name is a symbol of acceptance of the birth family and of the personal identity that this implies. It is an important step in the relationship being reconstructed with the birth family.

Obviously, the children who grew up in orphanages have less difficulty in defining who they are than children in adoptive families. Hence, they relate the matter of identity to the question of how different things would have been for them if they had not been separated from their families:

We have recovered our roots, our names; but not our childhood. There is no way of telling who we could have been if none of this had happened

Support Networks and Survival Skills

A very important aspect of the time the children spent in the orphanage was their relationship with the other children, generally viewed by them as very positive, especially in the children's villages because they created small groups of children who would grow up together. The other children were the main support network for the duration of the period in the orphanage:

My brothers and sisters from the orphanage, the group of us who grew up in the same house, they really mean a lot to me. I still visit them. Because we spent so many years together, we were almost like a family and we treated each other with love and respect

One of the participants of the workshop said:

If I were born again I wish that the army would not take me away from my family, but I also wish I could grow up with my brothers and sisters (from the orphanage), because they really are my brothers and sisters to me and they always took care of me

The hardship and discrimination also brought out strong bonds forged with other children in the same position, bonds that served to stand strong in spite of all the difficulties:

All of the boys from the orphanage, we all stood up for each other, we all watched our backs. We weren't that many, so we were all close. I remember we felt strong in that unity. It gave us security at school

Most of the survival skills mentioned were related to the bonding with other children; group activities that could also help in releasing pressure and letting go of anxiety:

The word of God helped, psychologically as well. When the evangelists would come, they would hand us one by one a piece of sweetbread and a "charamusca"[44], and we were all content. This moment, eating the sweetbread and listening to the word of God, I felt comforted[45]

I would play sports all the time; football, basketball, volleyball; that's when I felt good, playing with the other children, keeping my mind off other things

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44 A frozen sweet soft drink, typical for El Salvador.
45 See Life Story Emiliano

Almost all of the young people explained they had had fantasies about their family; fantasies they would keep alive in order to feel strengthened:

> *In my mind I had this fantasy of a photograph of my mother and father, the two of them together. I thought about them being alive*[46]

> *I would imagine my family coming to visit me in Aldeas. I was in the house and someone would come running up. "Andrea, your family is here". I would walk outside of the house, into the garden and then I would see them. I would be going down some stairs and they would be coming up the stairs and we would hug. And the other children would be all around us and they would say "Little Andrea really looks a lot like her mother. She looks like her brothers and sisters as well". They would all be commenting and admiring us. That was my fantasy until the day I was reunited with my family*

Another factor from which some of the young people drew strength was the cause their parents had been struggling for and, in some cases, had given their life for:

> *All the people who died, died for something; they gave their lives for us; for us to have a better future. I know my parents did not die in vain*

> *I learned to love, to share and to help my neighbour. I grew up being conscious that my parents were involved in the war in order to make changes possible for our country*

Religion and the sense of community surrounding the church were strong motivations for several of the young people as well:

> *I always say that the people in church are like my family. Sometimes I tell people that the pastor is my father. When I go to church, sometimes I go to forget the things that are going on or to not feel like I am rejected or alone*

> *Jesus Christ was the only one that could get me out of the gangs and fill the void in my heart*[47]

46 See Life Story Emiliano
47 See Life Story Vitelio

6. International Adoption within the Salvadoran Legal System

During the eighties in El Salvador, a child's adoption was possible if one of two legal conditions was complied with: one, a declaration of moral and material abandonment ordered by the Judge of Minors or, two, the parent's consent to the child's adoption. When a judge declared a child in a state of moral and material abandonment, the child's legal representation became the responsibility of the Attorney General. Generally, the lack of family protection, including the impossibility of finding surviving relatives motivated the judge to declare a state of abandonment. On the other hand, judges and lawyers promoted adoptions based on the biological family's consent, obtained generally because of the family's precarious economic situation.

In the case of children from the war zone, the judges would declare a state of abandonment without exhausting all possibilities of finding surviving family members. The social workers assigned to do the investigation on the child's background argued that they could not go into the conflict zones because of the risks that were involved. Their adoption case assessment focused almost entirely on the social and economic situation of the eligible adoptive family.

PRO-BUSQUEDA has reviewed dozens of adoption files of children who were brought to the orphanages or other child protection institutions by the army. It draws attention to the fact that the judges never required information in any of the cases from the Armed Forces regarding the child's origins. Apparently, the conflict situation led even official institutions to limit their inquiries when it came to demanding explanations from the Armed Forces.

In some of the cases, the Attorney General published pictures of children in the newspapers[48]. Unfortunately, for the families, these publications were usually ineffective. Newspapers would not be available in the conflict areas. Also, the explanation added to the pictures in the newspapers would usually miss some important elements which would have been important to help identify the children.

The court case of Imelda B R or "N."[49] is an example of a girl the Salvadoran Army took from a conflict zone. In her court file, the girl's story was summarily documented as follows: "In the month of June of 1984, the infant was taken to the San Pedro Hospital in Usulután by elements of the Armed Forces because she presented a bullet wound in her right thigh. Her parents are unknown; and it is not known if they're alive or dead"[50].

In the adoption file opened on August 24th, 1984 no request is made to Armed Forces to help determine the origins of the infant. No picture was published in the newspaper. The infant was given up for adoption on November 13th

48 PRO-BUSQUEDA has detected this kind of publicity in both "La Prensa Gráfica" and "El Diario de Hoy", the country's two largest newspapers.
49 "N" is the determination used in the Salvadoran legal system to substitute an unknown name or last name so when the court file states Imelda Betty Rubio or "N" it is immediately clear that her real name is unknown
50 File 70-A-6, Second Court of Minors

of that same year to the J family in the United States. The adoptive father asked the judge who authorised the adoption, Yolanda Meyers de Vásquez, about the girl's parents. She simply answered that they were presumed dead[51].

The courts' adoption files reflect the fact that in the majority of cases of children adopted during the eighties, the family consented to the adoption. According to the files, the adoptions were justified by the parent's poverty. In the majority of these cases, the father had not accepted responsibility for his children. The woman faced extreme poverty by herself, often with several children to take care of. Generally, the files state that because of her poverty, the woman decided to give her child up for adoption, as a way to improve the economic situation of her other children and relieve her own difficult situation.

Nonetheless, in these cases the Salvadoran civil war played an important role. Many people lost their homes because of it. Family members who normally would have helped support the rest of the family, were lost as a result of the violence. The war radically worsened the economic situation of hundreds of thousands of Salvadoran families. The prospect of raising a child without a house, income sources and without family support led many mothers to give up their children for adoption.

Some adoption lawyers used improper ways to convince the mothers or other family members to give up a child for adoption. According to the mothers affected, the lawyers convinced them to place their children up for adoption by affirming that they would come back to their homes after the war ended. The lawyers were quite conscious of the irreversible character of adoption, hid this knowledge from the families or, in some cases, lied to convince the families to continue with the adoption. PRO-BUSQUEDA has received dozens of claims of this sort denouncing this practice in the adoptions arranged by Dr. Pedro Carballo Alvarez[52].

> *Dr. Carballo told me: "I'm going to give you 300 colones so you can take your child to be examined. You are going to get his blood tests, also go to Suchitoto to get his birth certificate, and from there you're coming with me to immigration". "'Look , doctor", I said, "I can't give away my son to never see him again." "No", he said, "We are going to bring him back in two years for sure. We'll bring him back so you can see him and we are even going to help you so the people who adopt him assume a responsibility to help you with the rest of the children you have left, so you can put them in school"*[53]

In a different case, Mrs. María G R declared that Dr. Carballo told her the two girls she was giving up for adoption would be back when they were 12 years old. In 1982 she agreed to give up two of her four girls for adoption, Graciela, who was two years old, and Ana Silvia, four years old. Mrs. R had come to PRO-BUSQUEDA in order to look for help in contacting her daughters.

51 Through the help of PRO-BUSQUEDA, Imelda was reunited with her biological family in 1997, 13 years after the adoption. Both Imelda's parents are alive and live in the province of San Vicente with their younger children.

52 A rich and influential Salvadoran lawyer who worked on many adoption cases during the war.

53 María Inés Duran, San Salvador, 1996 – Testimony on the adoption of two of her children, one in 1983 and other in 1984 to two different Italian families. In 1981, Ms. Durán was forced to flee from her home in Palo Grande, Suchitoto because of the war.

PRO-BUSQUEDA found that Dr. Carballo had not only arranged the adoption of Mrs. R's daughters, but also of two of her sons: José and Reynaldo. All the information in Dr. Carballo's protocols before the Supreme Court[54] matched with that of María Graciela R. The problem is that Mrs. R never gave birth to a boy. She remembers that, in order to facilitate the paperwork, Dr. Carballo asked her to leave him her Salvadoran Identification Card. Using only that document, the lawyer was able to arrange the adoption for two other children, posing them as Mrs. R's sons.

Even a Civilian Court detected anomalies in Dr. Carballo's adoption arrangements:

> *Although the infant's mother expresses in the authenticated document her consent and approval of her daughter's adoption, she never explains (in the text) why she decided to give her up for adoption. Dr. Pedro Carballo Alvarez and Germán Atilio Anaya who intervene as attorneys, acted in a suspicious form when the first one asked to omit the court's audition of the mother. He (Dr. Carballo) certified the papers with the consent that the mother supposedly had signed. The mother never presented herself in court*[55]

In spite of the remarks in this court file, Dr. Carballo was allowed to continue arranging adoptions. During the eighties he arranged hundreds of them, mostly for Italian families.

It has already been shown that some lawyers forged documents in order to be able to arrange a child's adoption. One of the mechanisms used by the lawyers was to obtain false birth certificates for the children. The lawyers used contacts in the town halls of different communities to obtain these documents[56].

Peter S got in touch with PRO-BUSQUEDA in July of 1996 with the desire to find his biological family. In February of 1981, a family in the US adopted him after a brief procedure in the First Court of Minors of San Salvador. The birth certificate used for the adoption states:

> *In the book of birth certificates that this office issued in the year of 1974, there is one that reads as follows: "Birth Certificate Number Seven: – Pedro A P, male, was born at the fifteenth hour of the thirtieth day of the past year, in El Jícaro, hamlet of this jurisdiction, son of Juliana P, maid, literate, from this origin and address. Juliana Pérez, who testifies that she is mother of the new born gives this information and presented her personal identity card number three-nine-zero-zero-three thousand five hundred and eighty one issued by Municipal Authorities of this Village*

As part of the follow up of this case, a PRO-BUSQUEDA investigator visited the El Jícaro hamlet in Lolotique, where neighbours said that nobody called Juliana P had lived in that place. Employees of the City Hall in Lolotique

54 Dr. Pedro Carballo Alvarez, protocols one and seventeen of book number nineteen
55 File, 16-RDV-83, Third Civilian Court, San Salvador
56 In some cases a simple investigation may lead to proof that the certificate is false. In others, however, it is difficult to prove because the files of some towns were destroyed as a consequence of the guerrilla attacks during the eighties.

searched, without any success, the register corresponding to the personal identification card of Mrs. Juliana P and they said this number never existed. The Birth Certificate number seven of 1974 does exist, but it registers the birth of a different child.

Up to this date it is not clear what the true identity of Pedro A P is. His case indicates that the Court of Minors facilitated adoptions, possibly without knowing it, of girls and boys with an altered identity. This case and other cases point at the existence of child trafficking, even through the Salvadoran Courts.

The Court of Minors' adoption procedures assigned almost all children to foreign families, mainly from the United States, France and Italy. According to the US embassy 2,354 Salvadoran children were given American visas to travel to the US during the 80's[57]. PRO-BUSQUEDA has reviewed many of the adoptions arranged during the eighties. Up to this moment, the organisation has identified 45 cases of children who disappeared in military operations and were consequently adopted by foreign families through the courts.

During the research an attempt was made to contact a small number of children who had been placed up for adoption overseas: it was only possible to contact young people who were already known to PRO-BUSQUEDA, and in any case it was not feasible, for practical reasons, to reach a large number of children adopted abroad. Two interviews were undertaken by telephone, one interview was personally conducted in San Salvador, taking advantage of an adopted person's visit to El Salvador, and in addition, three adoptive families and one adopted child completed a questionnaire. Clearly these samples are small, and it cannot be assumed that they are representative: however they provide a rich source of qualitative material on their experiences. This chapter also draws on material gathered by PRO-BUSQUEDA from their dealings with adopted children over the years.

Circumstances of Placement

Most of the families who adopted children from war-torn El Salvador did so through adoption agencies or through associations of adoptive families. The former was more common in the United States, the country that received most of the adoptees, and the latter was more common in Europe. In France, some families who adopted children from El Salvador, associated with families who also had Salvadoran adopted children, mainly for social activities and simultaneously constituted a source of orientation for other families interested in adopting children from El Salvador. Also, religious groups played an important role in placing the children with families, especially in Italy. Additionally, several cases have been documented of foreigners living in El Salvador at the time arranging adoptions for themselves or for family or friends in their home country. Once an adoption from El Salvador had been arranged, often other families followed the example, using the network used before by the adoptive family that preceded them. This is one reason that there are notable concentrations of Salvadoran adoptees in for example, Ohio and Massachusetts, in the United States, and the north of France and the south of Italy.

57 The Boston Globe, July 14th, 1996, page 15. Note that this visa procedure is used exclusively for adoptions.

I sent the (Salvadoran) judge authorisation on behalf of my friend in San Salvador, so that they would be able to take care of the child while we were waiting for the paperwork to come through and for me to be able to travel to El Salvador. The information we received was very little. All we were told was that the adults had been killed and that the army had taken the children to the hospital in Usulután. It took three months and some newspapers advertisements with pictures of H, before she was finally declared to be in a state of "abandonment" and I could adopt her

Candidates for adoption were widely available in wartime El Salvador. As discussed in Chapter 5, many orphanages promoted or accepted international adoption as an option for their inmates, especially if their parents were unknown. Because it was a very lucrative business, many lawyers were actively looking for children to send into adoption, both in the "legal sphere" of the orphanages or displaced families willing to give up their children, as well as in the "illegal sphere" of child trafficking[58].

As a rule, on the receiving end of the adoption, an extensive social and economic review of the prospective adopters was performed, complying with local legislation. However, it seems that this was not always complied with, especially if an adoption agency was not involved. On the other hand, in El Salvador, the authorities handling the adoption process performed no real research into the status of the child and his or her biological family, although they often did demand social investigation for the adoptive family. In practice, lawyers were able to handle the adoption and represent the biological family simultaneously, and in many cases the biological family was never summoned to court or looked up or visited by corresponding authorities.

So, even if in the international adoption circuits, formalities of the adoption were complied with, the circumstances of placement were not ideal, as the child's family and personal history was not accordingly woven into the process. As a rule, the adoptive families visited El Salvador with the specific objective to pick up the adopted child who had been selected for them. Sometimes, on arrival in El Salvador the family was able to choose from the children available, but often the family had made the decision before, in their home country, often based on photographs and a little background information on the child.

J and T J, an American couple who adopted a Salvadoran child in 1984, described their experience when visiting El Salvador to pick up the girl selected for them

When we got to the orphanage, it was the strangest experience; we were surrounded by children and they all yelled "Take me, take me". Then they told us who the girl was we were supposed to take. She wasn't amongst those yelling. She was squatting on the floor as she was unable to walk, she was very much turned into herself and she didn't want to leave. We were told her parents had been killed during the war

58 See Chapter 3.

From the child's point of view the placement presented a mixed blessing. Care and comfort was perceived, but also distress about the new and very different situation:

> *It was hard, because I had to learn the language, I had to get used to other people. I felt very lonely, very sad that I had to leave (El Salvador). It wasn't until I was about 14 years old that I began to react differently to France, seeing that it was nice, that it was a country that gave me opportunities*

In cases of international adoption, the language barrier was the largest obstacle to be negotiated in the early stages of the child's placement.

> *(When I first arrived in the US) I was scared, not knowing who these people were and for a period of time not being able to talk to them – they only spoke English*

Curiously, this obstacle is not perceived to have been so large by the adoptive families. The adoptive family of the girl quoted above interpreted that

> *Language was never a problem. We learned a few words in Spanish and that got us by. We put her in day-care right away and had special tutors work with her to get her up to speed with school. A is very bright and catches on to things quickly. She became "Americanised" very quickly!*

Younger children had fewer difficulties with the language as they were "at the language development age":

> *When I adopted her, my daughter didn't speak yet, and she starting developing her speaking abilities with me, directly in French*

In one case we encountered, the child involved was already a bit older; being adopted and leaving El Salvador was seen initially as a disruptive experience, which was only moderated in time by the personal care of the adoptive family;

> *I had first known my (adoptive) mother in pictures only, during two years. It was hard to finally meet her, because I met a lady who was not really my mother. We stayed for a week together in El Salvador before leaving for France. I didn't want to leave. When I saw the aeroplane, I became very sad. I didn't want to leave my country. That's when I realised that a more intense pain would start, because I asked myself "Maybe my mother and father are alive, I leave the country, I leave my land, I leave it all…". I got on the plane, but I felt they had torn away my roots*[59]

59 See Life Story Emiliano

Material and Emotional Conditions of Care

The material conditions the children encountered in the adoptive family were overwhelmingly more favourable than those of the birth family or of the orphanages in their country of birth. Again, the years before the separation were times of hardship and suffering as the children's families were displaced and persecuted. Material conditions in the orphanages were not very favourable either. The difference between El Salvador and a middle class US or European family must have been astounding for the adopted children:

> *It was really different from what I remembered when I lived in El Salvador. I lived in a nice house. I had my own toys. All of a sudden I had just about everything that I wanted and I could think of. I was very spoilt*
>
> *Materially, I had absolute everything*

The adoptive families were also conscious of the differences and were generally content to provide these, sometimes crucial, material living conditions:

> *Materially there is no comparison, without our help it is doubtful if A would be walking today. We provided her with the best medical care available. She is educated and is a citizen of a country that can offer her and her children an opportunity for a better life*

Logically, the adopted children were received into families who would normally be well disposed to love them and take care of them. These families had gone through lengthy and costly procedures, had been reviewed by psychologists and social workers whether they were emotionally, socially and economically fit to adopt children. Not surprisingly, Salvadoran children adopted abroad almost invariably claim they were covered with love and attention from the adoptive family.

The hardship they had been through in El Salvador did leave marks in the children and their behaviour, especially during the first years of the placement:

> *E was 2 and an outgoing child who was anxious to connect with me and family members and friends. He learned English quickly and made friends easily. By the time he was 4 he seemed to have adjusted well to his new home. (However,) he had recurring nightmares for several years. Especially, he had trouble when I left him… he would become angry, worrying that I wouldn't return*

Best and Worst Moments

The best moments in the child/adoptive family relationship are usually referred to as those moments when their interaction reassembled that of a normal and happy family. For two adoptive mothers, the best moments are those were they saw their child "thriving" or "just being happy to be alive and to live".

Positive childhood memories included "family vacations together"; while positive reminiscences from adolescents were defined as "to go out to bars and dis-

cos", "to have friends", "to have a girlfriend", "to play football". Negative experiences included "family fights", "when I ran away from home" and "to be angry with my (adoptive) mother".

One adoptive parent related that the best moment in the experience of raising her adoptive daughter was when she finally embraced her (biological) father at their reunion in El Salvador, 16 years after the separation. But this is an exception. Other (adoptive) families see the reunion with the (biological) family as one of the hardest moments:

> *Experiencing how different our families are has been painful*

Perceptions of Care

The young people were aware of their adoptive status long before PRO-BUSQUEDA contacted them. Most adoptive families actively discussed with their children, at their different stages of development, the fact that they had been adopted. It would have been very hard to hide this fact, as the physical qualities of the adoptive family were invariably very different from those of the adopted children:

> *Never was her adoption a problem in our relationship. She knew her situation; things were always said and clarified, out of respect for the child*

> *With my encouragement, he always said he was from El Salvador and that he was adopted*

However, in some cases, later, in the teenage years, the issues related to the child's origin would once again play an important role in the relationship with the adoptive family:

> *I just knew my (birth) parents were alive, but no one would believe me*

The inconclusive story of what had happened in El Salvador could also end up affecting the relationship with the adoptive family:

> *As I grew up I felt like I didn't belong. I knew I was different from them. Everybody else in school they all had their birth parents, but I did not have my birth parents but my adoptive parents. I was always struggling with my doubts about what happened to my (birth) family. I was always fighting with my (adoptive) parents and my (adoptive) brothers. I didn't want anyone close to me. I didn't want to be with them any more. I was a real rebel, not listening to them, not obeying their rules*

The quality of care was very positively viewed by the adoptees, both of itself and in relation to the care they would have received from their biological family in El Salvador:

Yes, they (my adoptive parents) gave me love, the love of my mother that is her (in El Salvador), they (the adoptive family) gave it to me. While they did this, they helped me forget my mother in El Salvador and improve my behaviour

One of the adoptive parents offered a more intricate analysis of how the situation of care might have different between adoptive and biological families:

The question (of how different the care would have been) is hard to answer. His life has been economically much better and he has many wonderful opportunities available to him. He also has many people he is close to. If he had remained in El Salvador he would have been part of a very large very enveloping family, this is not culturally available to him in United States. (In the right circumstances,) both families would have provided love and stability

Of those cases specifically reviewed for this study, four were in families where there were no other children and one was adopted into a family that already had two other (biological) children, and, after the adoption in El Salvador, would soon adopt an additional child from another Latin-American country, making a total of 4 children. As the quality of the care was valued very positively by the adoptees, it is to be assumed that distinctions in treatment from other family members would be rather exceptional:

We were all treated equally (adopted children and biological children). We all had everything we needed and just about everything we wanted. We all went to the same Catholic school and the same High School. We all had to follow the same rules

Like some of the local adoptive families, some adoptive families abroad also contacted PRO-BUSQUEDA in order to ask for help in looking for their (adoptive) child's birth family[60]. Most families had no clue about their adoptive child's personal history and PRO-BUSQUEDA discovered that not all the foreign requests were about children who had been separated because of the war. In fact, in most of the cases followed up, other factors lay behind the adoption.

Identity

One of the issues that came up regarding matters of identity was that of a lack of access to information about their birth family:

When she was 13 years old, the only thing she asked for was a picture of her biological parents to see who she looked like. Too bad there was nothing, no clue available on her birth family, (because) this issue is important for young people… identity

60 This was not the case with the young people we interviewed for this case study

Most of the young people simply continue to use the name given to them by their adoptive parents. Only in two of the cases documented did the person use both names on certain documents, correspondence etc. separated by an "also known as." The identity issues the young people tended to be more directed towards cultural identity rather than a question of names.

The difference is that people in France are more cold and distant and that in El Salvador people are warmer. In this sense, I feel more Salvadoran than French, because I have warm blood[61]

Generally my (adoptive) child always felt part of our family. The only thing is that now that she is growing up, she feels more and more "Latin". In her mind and in her physique she feels different from her Belgian family

In the following case the issue of identity has taken on a more profound meaning because the young person has actually returned to El Salvador to establish himself in his birth country. He also maintains a very positive relationship with the adoptive family:

Emiliano Sánchez and Emiliano Seurrat[62]*, I have two names and two identities, but I like them both, to me they both mean strength, the strength of two different families*

However, the issues surrounding identity have not always been easy to handle for those adopted. One of the adoptive parents described how cultural and racial identity has become an issue in the relationship, because of the way these issues became increasingly important in her social environment:

People would always stare and try to figure out what the story was. If I was out shopping without S and I had Amalia (the adopted child) with me, some brave soul might come up and say something like, "Does she look like her mother?" I'd answer "Yes" and that would usually end their curiosity. I think Amalia had trouble fitting in at school, she wasn't sure what race she felt more comfortable with. We didn't learn until years later that she took quite a bit of abuse from the kids at school. We had white and blacks going to our school, but very few children from other races. Amalia at one point went through her "black" phase. We tried to have her attend Hispanic functions at a city parish but she didn't want to do that. It was difficult to get her to follow directions and to be trust-worthy. During this period, until she ran away, one tense day was followed by another

During her adolescence, Amalia felt very strongly that she did not fit in:

I had to make the best out of my situation. I prayed to God that one day it would all come to an end and at night I would wish on a star to please find my real family to get to know them. I had a lot of support from everyone. Everyone was helpful in their own way

61 See Life Story Emiliano
62 Both last names are fictional

In this case, sorting different identities proved to be a vital issue. Amalia was sent to different psychologist to help her with the identity problem. The adoptive parents claimed that

> *No one was ever able to get her to talk about her past*

Amalia stated

> *I would say that my (birth) family was alive and the psychologists wouldn't believe me, they would just say these were fantasies of mine*

Amalia was actually placed with a foster family in the US, different from her adoptive family. It wasn't until several years after the family reunion in El Salvador that the relationship between her and her adoptive family improved again:

> *Our relationship has never been better than now. We visit and we talk over the phone and both sides are free to say exactly how they feel without worry of the fallout of the conversation*

For some young people, family reunion led to a feeling of not belonging with the birth family. This is illustrated by a boy who was adopted by a French family at the age of eight:

> *I feel without roots. I feel up in the air. Who guarantees that these people I have met today are in fact my birth family? Why them and why not other people? Rationally, I understand that they are my family, but emotionally it is hard for me to accept them*

7. De Facto Adoption, Fostering or Appropriation

Introduction

In the preceding chapter we explored how the courts facilitated the legal adoption of children proceeding from war situations. However, many other children were never submitted to a formal adoption process but were taken in by local families and in most cases raised as if they were their biological children, especially in those cases where children were not more than two or three years old. As discussed in chapter 3, it is difficult to know how best to define these arrangements: the children were not legally adopted, hence the arrangement could be defined as a form of (usually permanent) fostering. However, the young people consider themselves to be "adopted" but clearly that was done in an *extra-judicial* manner which could be described as a form of appropriation. Throughout this chapter we refer to them as "adopted" but in this context the term needs to be understood as a *de facto* and not a legal concept. Up to this date, many of these children do not know they were adopted.

The mother who told us the following story had not yet found her child at the beginning of the year 2002:

> *From what the people of the town told me afterwards (after the disappearance of my daughter), a soldier took my 16 month old daughter from the massacre they committed in La Joya de San Luis and took her to the military headquarters of Ciudad Barrios. An official in the headquarters bought her clothes, shoes and milk. He got her all dressed up, nice and pretty. My mother (the child's grandmother) went to the barracks after a few days to ask for the girl. She asked the soldiers for the child they had taken there from La Joya de San Luis, and told them the girl was her granddaughter. The soldiers told her there was no child in the barracks there. But if the child's mother would come to claim the girl, she would have to stay in the barracks[63]. They say that the officer kept my child. They say a maid with a chauffeur came to take my child to his house*

Some of the children separated from their families in military operations would be desired for adoption by members of the Armed Forces[64]. PRO-BUSQUEDA has documented this practice with testimonies from former participants in the army's operations:

> *The girl I have raised was taken from the mountains of San Isidro, Cabañas. A military squad picked up the girl. In our provisional camp, they brought her to me. She was 10 months old and seemed very neglected. She had fever and her*

63 This is meant as a threat. It means that if the girl's mother comes to claim her, she will never leave the barracks again. In other words, the soldiers would kill her.
64 See also Human Rights Defence Attorney Resolution Case SS-0449-96

body was full of sores. I asked the chief of my squad, Captain José Alfredo Jiménez, for permission to take the girl to my mother. He asked Colonel Domingo Monterrosa and convinced him

Just after the battle, I picked the girl up. She was lying in a ditch. A lady was lying next to her dead. There was a small boy too, another soldier from the Civil Defence Group of Santiago or San Pedro Nonualco, picked him up. I carried the girl in my arms. My colleagues told me: "We have to kill that girl, she is the seed of communism. We have to cut the plague by the root". But I defended the girl and I told them that if they killed her they had to kill me first. When we got to the military headquarters, I asked the Colonel for permission to take her to my house and he granted it. So we adopted her and I went to the City Hall to get her a birth certificate

According to information from people who have asked for their identity to be protected, dozens of disappeared children ended up in the homes of military officials or other members of the Armed Forces. PRO-BUSQUEDA's investigations have confirmed some of these cases. The individuals who have informed PRO-BUSQUEDA about children adopted by army officials are obviously afraid of being exposed. To diminish this fear and facilitate cooperation, it is essential that the Armed Forces as an institution actively support the clarification of the cases of disappeared children.

Not all the cases of *de facto* adoptions or appropriation have occurred in families of elements of the Salvadoran Army. According to PRO-BUSQUEDA's investigations, regular Salvadoran families took in most of the children who were not sent to an orphanage or the Court of Minors. Most of these families never formalised the child's adoption status:

During those days people commented that the soldiers brought children back from the operations. Some went to see them at the headquarters and they said there were very small children, even though they had a couple of children who were a little bigger. They told them that if someone wanted to take them, they would give the child away to that person to take care of him or her. Some families in Chalatenango did that. They adopted these children

The adoptive family's motivations could vary from one case to another. The war and the poor control of the civil registers created a climate in which registering the children as their own was the easiest and safest solution to regularise the legal situation of their adoptive child, although legal adoption was an option (see page 31). In most cases the child was given a new first name as well as a new family name.

They found the children sitting by themselves in front of the house where the military operation was held the night before. We took them into our home. For some time, we waited to see if a family member came to ask for them, but nobody came. During the war, it was difficult and dangerous for someone to come and look or ask for them. When the children grew up, we needed to get them papers, so we went to register them at City Hall, as our own children

Legally this kind of adoption constitutes an improper appropriation, owing to the false testimony in which the legal relationship between the child and the family is established. However, it does not always mean that the adoptive parents had the intention of hiding the child's true identity. PRO-BUSQUEDA has encountered adoptive families who helped in many ways to recover the origins of their adoptive child, even before there was any indication of the biological family's whereabouts. There are also adoptive families who do not want to cooperate with PRO-BUSQUEDA, and some even hide crucial information about the child's origins.

Research Considerations

The interviews undertaken with the children in Salvadoran (informal) adoptive families reflect the contradictions these young people have to deal with even today after having been reunited with their birth family. First of all it was hard to find young people in this situation willing to collaborate with this case study. The young researcher involved with this study was himself adopted into three different Salvadoran families for periods of time. The most complex issue the adopted young people have to deal with is one of loyalty. They feel that their loyalty towards their adoptive family conflicts with the possibility of contact with their birth family (and PRO-BUSQUEDA as the intermediary that promotes this contact).

Most of those who have been adopted still have strong ties with the adoptive family, unlike the group of young people who grew up in institutions who were interviewed for this case study. But many have not had significant contact with their birth family after the reunion took place and many have not participated in any PRO-BUSQUEDA activity since that event. Of the children found by PRO-BUSQUEDA, those who were located in informal adoptive families in El Salvador were the most difficult to access and the group that, along with those who have been adopted abroad, present the lowest rate of family visits and participation in PRO-BUSQUEDA.

For this case study, it would have been very useful to interview a larger group than the 8 we were able to, but in spite of numerous attempts to have access to other candidates, it was not possible to interview more of them. Some of the factors that influenced the problem were the lack of availability of telephone communication, a difficult (adoptive) family situation, uncertainty about the youth's current whereabouts and expressed unwillingness to be contacted by PRO-BUSQUEDA. The contributions of the 8 who were interviewed were enriched by those of two other young people who mainly grew up in orphanages but also experienced periods of time in adoptive families, as well as the point of view of adult members of two adoptive families. It is difficult to judge to what extent these young people were representative of all those who were adopted locally: it is possible that the sample may be biased towards less successful placements.

Circumstances of Placement

In none of the cases investigated was the child placed with an adoptive or foster family by any kind of formal or legal placement process. The common procedure was for the children to be taken in by families after the soldiers brought them in from military operations. The process of placement began in the military base, with the soldiers interested in taking them in. Several cases have been documented in which the soldiers claimed to have risked their own lives to save the child from being killed by other members of the military. In those cases the motivation for protecting the child may have been a desire for adoption, because in some of those cases documented the soldiers requested to take the children home to their own families. In one case, evidence suggests that a very young child was auctioned amongst the different members of the military base, as there were several soldiers who wanted to take her home[65]. In another case, a five year old child was given the option to choose which of the soldiers he wanted to go home with:

> *"They gave us out like little chickens" Ricardo says of the day the soldiers took him and the other children from his village. "They said, 'Anyone who wants one can have one'"*[66]

Alberto H, the young man in question, remembered the following scene:

> *When we arrived at the military base in Chalatenango, one of the soldiers informed the colonel: "This child is the trophy that we have brought from the operation in Morazán. He is a survivor of the operation, so we have brought him here". The colonel approached me and told the rest of the troops that I had to decide my future. He asked me whom I wanted to go home with and told me that I could go home with him and that he would provide for everything. But I asked to go home with Manuel, the soldier who had carried me throughout the entire operation. "So be it", the colonel said. Manuel's mother was thrilled when we arrived at their house. She had asked her son to bring her a child and now I was there*

Not all of the children were adopted directly by the soldiers' families. The soldiers also handed out children to other families who wanted them. In one case documented by PRO-BUSQUEDA, soldiers began to give away the children while they were walking back to the barracks after the operation was over. Once they reached an area with no guerrilla activities they started handing out the children they had captured in the course of a massacre to the families who lived by the road they were crossing. In one case, the adoptive family heard that the army was giving away children they had taken from the guerrillas. This married couple had only girls and they wanted a boy, so they travelled over 20 miles to the military brigade, asked for a male child and were given one, without any further

65 "Campaign to reunite families brings Salvadoran person home", by Douglas Farrah, The Washington Post, May 12, 1996, Page 24

66 From "What did you do in the war, mama?" by Tina Rosenberg, New York Times Magazine, February 7, 1999

questions or paperwork. This practice has also been documented with children that were already in the hands of the Salvadoran Red Cross[67]. The Salvadoran army captured Elsy D, seven years old at the time, and dozens of other children during a large-scale military operation in a rural area of the province of Chalatenango. Most of the children captured were held for some days and then turned over to the Salvadoran Red Cross. According to Elsy D, at the Red Cross headquarters in Chalatenango families would come from far away looking for children to adopt. The families would just take the children with them when they travelled back home.

> *I vaguely remember that my little brother and I were in the house of some neighbours for a few days. Then the Red Cross came to pick us up. We slept one night in the Red Cross office. Then a woman adopted me and took me to her house in San Miguel*[68]

Other scenarios for placement with an adopted or foster family have also been documented. In one case a woman working with the guerrillas in a camp in rural Usulután was forced by the military commander in charge to give up her recently-born child and leave him with a *campesino* family in the area. That same week, when word came out they had adopted a child from the guerrillas, the foster family was forced to flee from army repression and they took the child with them, breaking all bonds with the child's biological mother.

One of the children interviewed described how he had first been separated, at very young age, from his biological family to serve as a cover in a guerrilla safe house in the city. In this period, the biological family did visit the child from time to time. When the Army detected guerrilla activity in the house, the child was hastily placed with the family of the guerrilla fighter in charge of the house. This guerrilla fighter was killed shortly after, and his family was left with the child and no clues about his origin, so they decided to adopt him.

One of the young people claimed that, while hiding in Honduras, the guerrillas pressured his family to hand him over to a different family. At their initial refusal, rebels killed his father and forced his mother to hand him over. The child was too young to remember this; his biological family told him about these circumstances after the reunion. What he did remember was one time when a woman presenting herself as his mother came asking for him at his (adoptive family's house). He was overhearing the conversation from inside the house. His adoptive family denied that he was still living with them. That was how he found out that he was not their biological son.

Informal placement with adoptive or foster families also occurred once the child had already been placed in an orphanage or similar institution. This happened with the intervention of the Salvadoran Red Cross or on the family's or child's own initiative. On the other hand, some adoptive families preferred to place the children in an orphanage after some time. Fear for their safety as they were raising a child from the "guerrillas" was the motivation in at least one case:

67 See "That day most awaited: searching for El Salvador's disappeared children" ("El día más esperado: buscando a los niños desaparecidos de El Salvador"). UCA, San Salvador, 2001, ISBN 99923-34-08-8.

68 See Life Story, Ana Lilian

It wasn't until much later that I found out why they had taken me (from my adoptive family). There had been rumours in the village that I was "a child from the guerrillas" and so they (my adoptive parents) became afraid . They called the Red Cross who came to pick me up and take me to an orphanage

The following testimony also indicated that the child's own desire to be with an adoptive family rather than in an institution was a factor in at least one case:

I figured that if I stayed in the orphanage I would have no one to look after me in the future. Time would come when they told me "Goodbye", and I would have to work things out for my own, without any support. That's why I was looking for someone to adopt me. When I saw the opportunity, I took it. I behaved very well with the lady that took care of us (at the orphanage). One day she asked whether I wanted to go to live with her in her home and I said "Yes". I escaped from the orphanage to be with her

Placements were not always permanent solutions, although the investigation indicated that more often than not they were. The child's interpretation of the events and his or her reaction to the placement seems to be very much influenced, especially in retrospect[69], by the relationship they developed with the substitute family. In some cases, the child was too small even to remember the placement. In others, the children remember certain reactions to extreme situations of abuse they were subjected to, but have no (or hardly any) memory of their reaction to the substitute family if the situation was more "normal". When asked, the young people's most common reply was

I felt good from the first moment on

The other general reply was

I felt bad, because I was treated badly

Although not clearly signalled out or remembered by the young people we interviewed, the trauma of the separation recently experienced must have been an important factor in the early days of the placement. Fear and insecurity must have been very common feelings for those children.

Angela C, for example, saw her mother shot by the soldiers. In her last breath, her mother told her six-year-old child to take care of her little brother. The soldiers picked the children up. Angela lost sight of her little brother as one of the soldiers walked off with him. Another soldier took her, first to the barracks and then to his house and presented her as a gift to his mother. Angela recalled her placement in the following terms:

69 The investigator had the impression that, in those cases where the foster worked out well, the children were not keen to remember the difficulties or awkward situations that might have existed for them at the beginning of their placement.

Yes, at first I was afraid of him, but then he told me he was going to take me to his mother and after they took me to her, I lost my fear and I started to love her as my mother and him (the soldier) as my father. I think he did a very good thing, because if he hadn't picked me up maybe they would have killed me, so I am grateful to him and to my mother (the soldier's mother) who took care of me

Most of the Salvadoran families who informally adopted the children did not look upon this adoption as a temporary arrangement. The conditions of the children's placement were such that they assumed the parents were either dead or would not be able to look for the children. In some other cases, the duration of the war and the fact that most separations took place in an early stage of the conflict, was such that by the time conditions had changed and family tracing might have been a possibility, the adoptive families did not consider it to be an option any more, because a strong mutual emotional dependency had grown between the family and the child, now usually an adolescent. Nevertheless, a few adoptive families did take the initiative to search for the child's biological family through PRO-BUSQUEDA and it is likely that others did so on their own account, with or without success[70].

Material Conditions

The material conditions the children encountered in the substitute family were almost invariably more favourable than those of the family of origin. The testimonies of what the families and the children went through during the months or years before the separation are heartbreakingly illustrative of the scarcity suffered. The ongoing military operations often went days on end with no food, or even water. When food was available, it often was a meal of tortillas[71], made of the core of plantain trees or of *maicillo*, a product usually only used to feed animals.

As a rule, the adoptive family was not one of those families "on the run" (as the family of origin had been) or who was persecuted for political reasons, or at least not at the time they adopted the child. This almost automatically meant they had better material living conditions than the family of origin. The only exceptions are those cases where the children were adopted with the express objective to exploit them economically (see discussion on page 78f.).

In the adoptive families in rural areas or impoverished urban areas, the material conditions were similar to those of the family of origin before the war. The children's normal diet consisted of corn and beans, with little variation. Health and sanitary conditions were generally poor and access to education limited. Even so, only one of those interviewed for this case study had not learned how to read or write during the family separation[72], meaning that most of those chil-

70 It is impossible to know how many cases of family separation were solved during and after the war without PRO-BUSQUEDA intervention, because no specific registration is available. However, it is likely that at least dozens of cases (if not more) were resolved without PRO-BUSQUEDA ever knowing about them.

71 Regular tortillas are the staple food in the Salvadoran countryside and are made of corn dough.

72 No exact information is available on how many of the children found by PRO-BUSQUEDA are able to read and write, although the author knows two more cases of children who when reunited with their (biological) families had not learned how to read or write.

dren who grew up in relatively poor families did have access to primary education:

At the National Guard post was the first time I watched television, because where we lived before there was no electricity, only kerosene lamps. I was received well (by the family of the National Guard member who took me). They lived in a house made of bricks and mud. The house was large and the walls were thick. They were poor, but not of the most desperate kind of poverty; they were poor but hardworking. They lived off agriculture. Thank God that my (biological) mother always made an effort and, before these military operations, we did not live badly. I remember we did all right. My birth mother sold sodas and beer in the village and on Sundays, whenever there was a football match, she would make rice with milk and we would all go out and sell it. I think we were doing well. The problem was that the military operations tore our family apart

On the other hand, the material conditions of those children adopted into middle class families improved notably. Health, education, good food and abundant toys were provided. Some of the young people interviewed clearly remembered the impression caused by the different material conditions. For many of them it was the first time they watched television, the first time they had toys that were not made of sticks, leaves and feathers, the first time they actually slept in a bed with a mattress and sheets, and so on:

I remember how our house used to be and everything was very poor. When I arrived here I marvelled that the house was nice from both the inside and the outside. I felt everything was very beautiful; I liked the beds very much. When they bought me toys I noticed a big difference. If I think how they (my birth family) live, I think I wouldn't have been able to get anywhere; the furtherest I would have got in school would have been ninth grade. Big difference

This man took me to a big house. He took me inside and told me: "This is your room". There was a bed and some other things. Then he showed me around the house. There was a room with just toys. The toys belonged to the two children he and his wife had of their own. They asked me what I wanted to eat and I told them: "Meat". Every time they asked me I always answered the same: "Meat". I remember a television with a remote control. I was fascinated. I had never seen anything like it. Also, I always picked the same toy from the room: a plastic gun that made noise when I pulled the trigger. When I was first brought to the city, every time I travelled in a bus or by car I became nauseous and I vomited. It took me several months to get used to travelling in a vehicle[73]

However, usually economic standards were not as high as those described above, even in middle class families, and the transition from countryside to the city is less clearly remembered by most of those interviewed:

My adoptive family was not rich but not poor either. They had all that was necessary. I don't remember this, but I know that my (biological) family was much poorer, farmers who rented land, a large family that was very poor

73 See Life Story Ana Lilian

Only those children adopted to be exploited were deprived of basic material living conditions. One remembered:

> *I wasn't given any shoes*

Another youth described how the people of the town he was living in felt sorry for the way he was treated and gave him things that were then immediately taken from him by the adoptive family for the use of their other children:

> *Some of the older men of the village saw me work very hard and they talked to me, they even got me clothes and a pair of shoes. The clothes were new. This woman (the adoptive mother) took them away. Whatever was given to me, she would take it away and give it to her own children*[74]

Issues of abuse and exploitation are discussed later in this chapter.

Emotional and Affectionate Conditions

Throughout the interviews the young people were asked to look back in retrospect on their experience with the adoptive family. However, it turned out to be very difficult for them to extract personal difficulties they might have experienced during the early years of the adoption from a general feeling of well-being and gratitude for the adoptive family.

Undoubtedly, it must have been hard for these children to adapt to a new family, to accept the care of a new "mother", new brothers and sisters etc. However, usually they remembered they had adapted quickly, without any problems:

> *I felt good with them (the adoptive family) right away. I felt I was always loved and taken care of*

Generally, the young people who remembered both families well had few complaints about the affection received from the adoptive family. Once again, the exceptions were those families who adopted the children to exploit them rather than to take care of them[75]. When asked to discuss in more detail how they were treated emotionally and affectionately, the answers tended to be short and not very specific.

> *I remember they (the adoptive family) took me places, bought me things… They talked to me about other members of their family I had never met who sent me things. I only said: "All this stuff, all this attention" – it made me forget where I came from*[76]

Often the adoptive family had a specific motive for wanting a child. Some of those encountered are the following:

74 See Life Story Esteban
75 See section on abuse and exploitation on page 82f
76 See Life Story Ana Lilian

a) The other children were getting older and beginning to leave the house and the parents missed having a smaller child around

b) The adoptive family did not have any children and wanted one

c) The adoptive family did not have any male or female children and wanted one, "to help mum or dad", etc. Of those interviewed, out of a total of 9, two had been the family's only child and 4 had been the family's "Benjamin"[77].

d) Additional motives encountered in adoptive families are of a religious and humanitarian nature.

Much more complicated than summing up the affection and emotional care received from the adoptive family was comparing this to that received from the birth family, especially with those who had no clear memory of this period. Some young people were hesitant to express it, but in their words there was felt a certain reproach towards their birth family.

This might have been partly based on memories of hardship spent together with the biological family, but it is also likely to stem from a general attitude within their adoptive environment[78] towards the birth family. The adoptive families generally experienced the war in a very different way from that of the birth family. Their attitude may be based on some of the circumstances around the child's placement, but is more commonly based on prejudice or misconceptions about those people who were persecuted for political reasons – prejudices and misconceptions that resulted from the version of the events as offered by the authorities and by the media. It often contained a political element of questioning the human values of a family associated with the guerrilla movement and implying that the family separation was the result of being abandoned. The opinions and feelings the adoptive family had about the family of origin, have often echoed in those of the young people:

> *I am resentful that my (birth) family did not keep me. It doesn't matter where I would have lived if they had truly loved me, but I really did not have a family at the time because they left me somewhere. So, why are they looking for me now? I don't want to blame my (biological) father. It is useless to regret; why moan over something that has already passed? But my father is indifferent to me. It is my adoptive family that I care for*[79]

There has been a wide range of different quality in the attention of the adoptive or foster families. Only in those cases where there has been specific abuse did the young people feel they had been treated badly or discriminated against with regard to other members of the family. Most felt they had been treated "just the same" as the other family members and did not remember or feel any distinction was made between them and other children of the household:

> *I was looked upon the same as the other children, as a legitimate son*[80]

77 The family's youngest member, often quite a bit younger then the rest of the (biological) children.
78 The adoptive environment does not only include the adoptive family but also school, community, church etc.
79 See Life Story Ana Lilian
80 See Life Story Esteban

My (adoptive) family gave me everything my biological family would have given me

Only one case was documented in which the child, even though he was not physically abused, was treated in a very different way from the rest of the family. Eventually, the adoptive family left the child in an orphanage, rather than keeping him:

They didn't treat me badly, but they did treat me very differently from the other children in the house, especially after the first months had passed. They were all light-skinned and they would call me "Black one", because my skin is darker. At first they said it in a normal tone, but later they said it with loathing. The food they gave me was of lesser quality than the food they gave the other children, they gave me fewer clothes. They made me feel I was a burden. One time, at Christmas, they celebrated and I stayed outside, in the street in front of the house. No one from the family invited me to join them. I felt very lonely

Family situations are almost invariably subject to changes, and sometimes these changes affected the care the children received:

My (adoptive) mother took charge of me when she was only 18 years old. Afterwards she had a son of her own, but she never stopped treating me as her first son. I only felt a difference when I started to live with my uncle and my cousins. They treated each other with more closeness and I sometimes felt a little bit more of an outsider

Even after the reunion and living again with my birth family, I still consider the adoptive family as "my own" as well. This woman (the one who raised me) was very loving; with me she was the best. She showed me sincere affection, because she wouldn't even let my (adoptive) brother lay a finger on me: "Don't you dare bother my little boy" she used to say

In a few cases the young people felt they had been treated well, but that the affection they received had not been quite the same as that received by the family's biological children or as the affection they would have received with their biological family:

The care could not have been the same, because all this time I was growing up with other people, not with my own mother

In the interviews, only on a rare occasion was a more subtle interpretation put forward:

Before, I thought it was normal for my (biological) mother to become upset with me from time to time, but that was when I didn't know I had been adopted. Afterwards, once I found out, I began to associate certain things, for example when and why she becomes angry with me. Suddenly I felt that she was angry

at me because she wasn't really my mother. I began to think that she behaved in such a way because I was not really her son

In one case, a child was fostered by a family whose children were all fostered from war-related situations. In the beginning, when he was very small, he felt cared for by this family, but when most of his brothers and sisters had been recovered by their (birth) families, the situation for him and his only remaining (adoptive) sister worsened:

I used to love them (the adoptive parents), but too bad they didn't understand that. At first they did not punish us, because there were 8 of us, and they just took care of us, because we were little. We were treated fine. Of those 8 children, only two of us were left, their biological parents picked the others up. When it was just my little (adoptive) sister and me, we began to suffer, because they (the adoptive parents) were angry that they had taken away all the other children. They started to give us beatings. My little sister was beaten every day. I myself less often, because I went out at two in the morning to find the cow and milk her. They only beat me if I returned after 6:30 in the morning. But my sister stayed at home and suffered more

Abuse and Exploitation

When asked whether they had been abused or neglected in any way, most of the young people interviewed emphatically said "No". They made comments like

I will never say they have treated me badly

They even reflected a certain reluctance to answer the question. Physical punishment is considered normal in most Salvadoran families and the young people's reply does not mean that all treatment and behaviour by the adoptive families was exemplary. It was the interviewers' impression that adoptive children were, generally speaking, treated well, very similar to the way "normal" children would be treated by their family. However, the interviewers also gained the impression that the young people were reluctant to "complain" about their adoptive families if they felt they had not "really suffered".

When talking with them whether they had felt abused or neglected by their adoptive family, the only ones who did say "Yes" had stories to tell that went way beyond physical or emotional mistreatment. It was the kind of abuse more aptly to be defined as "modern day child slavery".

Of those interviewed, two young people[81] suffered periods with a family that exploited them physically in a systematic way. Both managed to escape this situation after a number of years. PRO-BUSQUEDA has encountered a few other cases of such exploitation. Usually in these cases the child is seen as a source of cheap labour. The children were used for agricultural work and work around the

81 One of these was Esteban – see his Life Story

house, given very little rest and food, and treated very differently from all other members of the household.

The key to this kind of exploitation is the almost total lack of formal protection in Salvadoran society for the children once they have been separated from their families. Unfortunately, this kind of child exploitation is not a phenomenon related directly to the war, but most certainly takes place in El Salvador today as well. Although formally illegal, it is hard to imagine that a Salvadoran family be summonsed for taking in an "orphan" or a "runaway" child, even if the family exploits and abuses him or her.

During the war, some kind of political element to justify exploitation may have been additionally used[82], but it actually happened because these families felt they could profit from it and they could get away with it. Towards other members of the community, they would usually present their action as "humanitarian", because, in spite of their poverty, they had taken in a "poor orphan":

> *After these men killed my mother, one of them (members of a government sponsored paramilitary group) took my sister and me to his house. But he didn't treat us like the rest of his children. Oh no. It was only work and work. Then he sold my sister to another family in a nearby village. She was to do the household chores for this family. And the man kept me to work the fields, with the animals, everything. I was forced to work from dawn to dusk, and was hardly given any food. This went on for years. When I was twelve years old I managed to escape and I joined the guerrillas. This was a huge improvement*

In another case, a child who had been captured by the military was thrown out on the street a couple of months later and picked up by a woman who raised the child to exploit him both physically with hard labour as well as sexually in a brothel. This proved to be a complicated case in which the young man became severely damaged psychologically. A couple of years after the war ended, the child had managed to escape from the brothel and find his family on his own. He arrived at his sister's home dressed as a woman. His family had his hair cut and gave him men's clothes. For a while he stayed with his family, and started to do the work the other men in his family did, working the field etc. He started leaving the house for days on end, returning with money. The family suspected he was prostituting himself again. Then he disappeared altogether, supposedly moving to Guatemala.

In the two cases documented for this study, the labour exploitation took place in a rural area:

> *My (adoptive) father sent me out to look after the corn fields all day. When I focused on something else just for a minute, I would feel his belt hitting on my back or he would launch rocks at me with a slingshot. Once he split my head and another time he threw me off a hill into an abyss and I fell into a thorny plant. He kept on chasing me and I had to run all over the thorns with my feet bleeding. When I was sick he started beating me with the blunt side of his*

82 They were "the children of the guerrilla"

machete. I became bitter. I was seven the first time I stood up to him. He told me: "Tomorrow is your birthday and my gift to you is that you have to bring me six tercios[83] of firewood. Barefooted, I had to walk over a mile to get to the place to collect the wood, then wrap it together and take it home. He even put me on a schedule. He said: "From four to five in the morning you will make the first trip; from five to six thirty the second, etc.". At midday I had only brought in three tercios of firewood, and I had taken some tortillas out of the kitchen and I was eating when he came and starting whipping me with his belt. "What are you doing here? You have only got 3 tercios so far!" I ran for cover and I got my machete. Then he got his as well. I was so angry I was waving my machete at him, and he was just laughing at me. I was ready to die. Then my (adoptive) mother arrived, and she calmed him down and then calmed me down. I was so disappointed I thought of killing myself, but I decided to run away instead

Of the 3 known cases of children running away from physical and emotional abuse by adoptive families, one was taken in by another family[84], one incorporated with the guerrilla movement and one wandered from town to town, working in the town fairs to stay alive:

I went from town to town, from city to city, without living or staying anywhere. Every day that passed I felt that death was awaiting me. Every day that passed there was more disappointment: not knowing about a brother or a sister, a cousin or an uncle, nothing. At the fairs you can't just trust anyone, because if you do, they have you by the throat fast enough. I started to make some money, but I lost it quickly because of wandering in the streets and getting involved with drugs. My life has been madness only

Best and Worst Moments

Although the questions were aimed specifically at the period spent away from the biological family, many of the young people interviewed signalled that the worst moment had been the family separation and the best the family reunion. Other best moments included graduating from college and university, Christmas celebrations with the entire (adoptive) family and finally having the feeling of being totally accepted by the (adoptive) family.

One of the young people volunteered that his best moment had been playing in the streets with other children, something he hardly had been able to do with his biological family because of constant army persecution:

I made a whole bunch of friends in no time and we roamed the streets together, playing hide and seek and other games. I was always out playing most of the day

Two of those interviewed said that the best moment had been "never". There were more lengthy replies regarding "worst moments". Apart from the scenarios

83 A quantity unit used for firewood, more or less the amount that one adult person can carry.
84 See Life Story Esteban

of abuse described before, worst moments included death within the (adoptive) family; separation from a (biological) brother or sister he or she had been together with since the separation from the rest of the family; and renewed separation with the adoptive family, because of marriage or other circumstances:

> *My worst moment was when my (adoptive) mother told me she was going to get married, because this meant she would leave the house. I knew her future husband. This man had children and he brought them from time to time to play with me. I liked that, but the problem was when they were going to get married. That I didn't like. My (adoptive) aunt told me she (the adoptive mother) would get married but that she would not leave me altogether; she would still visit me… It was very sad for me because I felt once again I was losing someone*[85]

> *My first worst moment is when they took away my (biological) sister, because I lived the longest with her. The Guards took her away. My sister was little. She didn't say anything, she just cried. Whenever I remember this moment I feel terrible. I say we have this memory as an open wound; whenever touched upon, it bleeds. It is something that will never heal. My other worst moment is when the woman I grew up with died*

In one case, the political persecution also touched upon the adoptive family and is remembered as one of the worst moments:

> *During the war, my (adoptive) brother was a member of the guerrillas. He was going from place to place, renting different houses in the city, because they were already after him and all of the (adoptive) family. Here in San Jacinto, they (government agents) drove by in a pick-up and machine-gunned the house. Another time they entered the house. This was a difficult moment. We were all on the floor. My (adoptive) brother was hit on the head with a gun*

Perceptions of Care

Of those interviewed 2 were told by their family that they had been adopted only after PRO-BUSQUEDA approached them. This was a very difficult moment for the young people involved and for the adoptive families. In other cases, not documented for this study, adoptive families have resisted telling their adoptive child the truth, and have shut off contact with PRO-BUSQUEDA as much as possible, but in the two cases documented here, the family agreed to tell their adoptive child the truth:

> *I knew when I was 16 years old. PRO-BUSQUEDA contacted me. The one who told me was my (adoptive) uncle. "These people have come to see you and they want to talk to you. They are going to take you to your true family". At first I laughed at him and I didn't believe him. At that moment I felt very confused. To find out when you are 16 that you have someone else in life is not easy*

85 See Life Story Ana Lilian

I was told the truth when I was 21 years old. At first I was very surprised. The strange thing was that I started to remember that maybe they were right I started to remember little things I had completely forgotten

In another case, the child found out not from his adoptive family, but from comments made by other people:

I was 15 or 16 years old. I found out from other people, but they didn't tell me to hurt me. They just explained the situation to me: "Look, she is not your mother, your family probably was killed in the war". That's how I knew it was not my own family, but one can say that right now it (my adoptive family) really is my own family

All the rest remembered enough of the family separation to have known always that they were adopted. Two of the adoptive families actually promised they would help the children search for their relatives when they were bigger or when an opportunity arose. A few local adoptive families actually contacted PRO-BUSQUEDA in order to explain their case and to ask for help in looking for their child's birth family:

They (the adoptive family) would ask me and I would tell them what I remembered. And they would try to lift my spirit: "No, right now you are no longer lost and some day you will meet your family again". They never put me down and always made me feel confident that one day I would be able to find my (birth) family again[86]

Once the birth family is located, the "loyalty issue" is easier to handle for those young people who always knew they had been adopted and who additionally experienced their adoptive family looked favourably upon the idea of finding the birth family. In most other cases, where the young person had not been told of his or her adoption, or the adoptive family regards the biological family negatively, the "loyalty issue" became one of the main obstacles in the process of family reunification and, eventually, in the individual's personal development.

Generally, the young people interviewed stated that the quality of care received by the adoptive family was the key factor in overcoming the family separation:

I arrived, and because the mother loved her son a lot, she was so happy with me. She would call me her "little boy", and she was very caring and loving with me. I am very grateful to this woman because she gave me what a mother gives to her son

Another young person told us in the Workshop that

From the day the soldier (who picked me up during the military operation) took me to his house, he told me he was not my father. He told me: "I want you to fix

86 See Life Story Esteban

in your mind that I will be your brother, my mother will be your mother, and we are going to give you all the love and appreciation you need. Don't feel bad". I really appreciate the love these people gave me, without knowing where I was from. They never put me down and always used to tell: "How big you are! How fast you are growing!"

They use words such as "substitute" to indicate how the void left by the sudden disappearance of the biological family was filled:

Yes it helped (to be adopted). They filled the space that was left by my biological family. I feel that here (with the adoptive family) I substituted the same love, the same love I felt. The love was always the same (as with my biological family). More so when R (the adoptive mother's older son) was killed, I guess she gave all the love she felt for him to me

In considering how the care received from the adoptive family was perceived by the children, the first distinction to be made is between those children who were aware they had been adopted and those who were not. In the latter case, the relationship was perceived equally as that of a "normal" family:

I called them mama, papa, uncle, grandmother, cousins. I never used their first names. I felt they were my own family. Never, not even in my dreams, did I imagine that they were not my own family

In many of the cases in which the child was aware of his or her adoption, the perception of family relationships was much more complex, although often not seen in this manner by the young people themselves. One way of exploring these adoptive family ties is to consider how the family is looked upon in terms of kinship or forms of address used. Often they indicate family relations to be emotionally somewhat confusing:

I always called my (adoptive) mother "Mother" and I called my (adoptive) brother "Uncle", even until today

Another young woman who was adopted as a girl insists she was treated the same as all the other members of the family, but she obviously struggles with the irregularity of the family situation, of calling "father" a person that is her (adoptive) mother's son and also questioning the "worth" of the relations with her (adoptive) brothers and sisters. It sounds as though it is easier for her to call someone in her adoptive family "daddy" than to call him "brother":

I have more (adoptive) brothers and sisters. I say "Daddy" to my daddy Fredy, but he says that he is not really my father but more like my brother, because his mother is my (adoptive) mother. But I say it is not the same. In order to have a brother one must bleed. I try to care for them as my brothers, but far away I feel that it is not the same. They have told me there is a child in Zacatecoluca who was also taken (by the army) and people says he looks like me. Maybe he is my brother

A child who had several caretakers before finding the family he would eventually stay with, stated:

> *Everyone that took care of me, I called them "Mamma" and "Daddy"*[87]

Generally, if the caretakers covered their material and emotional needs, they were called "Mummy", "Daddy" or "Aunt". Most of the young people do not remember calling their adoptive family members in any other way, although one of them described how the evolving closeness as time progressed translated into changing forms of address:

> *I remember my uncle, my mummy, my granny were there. Granny asked me: "Look, here are the two women you know (of this family); now which one do you want to be your mother? Do you want it to be the one who brought you here or the other one?". I looked at both women and I said: "The other one". "'Why?" she asked me. "She has something that looks like my (birth) mother". "What?" she asked. "The hair", I said. And afterwards, other times, I would sometimes say it was the face. I always used to call them (the woman in the adoptive family) "Miss". Only my granny, I called her "mama Chunguita", just as the other children in the family did. The other ones were "Miss" to me, even if I was only five years old. One day she (my adoptive mother) told me: "No, you are going to call me 'mummy' and to make it easier for you, you can say 'mummy Milagro' or 'mummy Mila'". That was when I started to call her "mummy" and later on I started to call her "mum", but that was entirely my own initiative, nobody told me to*[88]

It is likely that this process of adaptation and gaining confidence has taken place with most of the adopted children, but is no longer recalled or related by them because it didn't reflect their reality for the most recent years spent with the adoptive family. Also, it is likely to have been a different process in each case, with the children often beginning to use the names of an intimate family relationship long before this relationship was actually felt as such by the children.

There was also a sense in some of those interviewed that the adopted family had, in time, "earned" the forms of address that they had established since the beginning and that it would be disrespectful to question the use of these forms of address:

> *To my (adoptive) mother all the time I have only used the word "Mummy" and I will never cease to do so, because she is my mother. The other woman (who took care of me when my (adoptive) mother emigrated) – I have respect for her and I call her "Niña*[89] *Lidia"*

In those cases where there was no physical abuse in the relationship and the relationship was lasting, the young people interpreted their sense of belonging to the

87 See Life Story Esteban
88 See Life Story Ana Lilian.
89 Term of respect used for elderly women.

(adoptive) family as very strong and positive. All of them claimed to feel them just as much their family as the birth family. One young person said she felt this family to be

> *More like my own family than my birth family*[90]

Probably, other young people felt the same but didn't want to express it, because of loyalty to the birth family. This also occurred the other way around. The young people also felt they owed loyalty to the adoptive family and could or should not compare them negatively with their birth family.

In some cases, the reunion of the adopted child with his or her birth parents proved to be a positive experience not only for the young person but for the two families as well:

> *By reunion with (our adoptive children's) family of origin, we feel that our family has become bigger. They have brought us together. The love that we feel for them makes us be close to one another. We want to share that as one big family*

Identity

When asked about personal identity the answer offered by the young people tended to be very much directed to what name was on their birth certificate and what confusion had been generated with the names they had been given. In one case the adoptive family obtained for their (adoptive) daughter 3 different birth certificates, all with ages very different from her actual age[91], and in one of which she appears not as a girl but as a boy. Also the family was aware of the girl's true name, but preferred to name the girl themselves, after a deceased relative:

> *My name was Sandra Patricia, but my (adoptive) mother changed it. I don't know why… I told her what my name was but she said she liked Ángela more; that was the name of her mother*

In another case, the child did not remember he had been adopted, and only found out when PRO-BUSQUEDA approached his adoptive family but he did remember that often when his (adoptive) family called him Roberto Carlos, he said to himself: "But my name is René Mauricio". However, he never expressed this to those whom he believed to be his true relatives. Only after the reunion did it turn out that the name his (biological) family had given him at birth was in fact "René Mauricio".

Most of the young people actually took pride in the fact that their (adoptive) families got them a birth certificate that recognises them as their legitimate son or daughter:

> *My (adoptive) family registered me in Honduras as if I was their own son, with as much worth as any of their other sons*[92]

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90 See Life Story Ana Lilian.

91 If a child is registered after a certain period of birth, a fine is to be paid. In order to avoid the fine, this particular girl's age was reduced more then five years.

92 See Life Story Esteban

I carry her legitimate name (my adoptive mother's), as if she had given birth to me. This is why I am so grateful with the M family. She loved me as her own son and her husband as well. He is still alive. He calls me "Son" and I call him "Dad". Really, as far as fathers go I am not doing so badly, because I have my father, the National Guard who picked me up; my father, the husband of the woman that raised me; and my father, my own father

My own name is José G G M, but now I already have another one, that of A H. My (adoptive) mother gave me that name. I identify more with A H than my other name

When requested to leave the specifics of the names they used aside and enter the field of *how they define themselves*, the replies were, at best, short. The personal identity question is a complicated one, and many of the young people, especially those who have had to deal with difficulties with their adoptive family because of the reunion with their birth family, prefer to avoid the issue. Obviously, the personal identity issue is considered to be problematic and has not been dealt with sufficiently on an emotional level by those interviewed.

However, the names do shed some light on how they feel. Of those interviewed five only use the first names and last name given to them by their adoptive family, one only uses the name given to him by his biological family and two use both names. The use of names as described here is not restricted to the private sphere, but these same names are also used for ID cards, work, school etc..

The young people want to continue to be considered as members of the adoptive family, and have a wide range of motives for this, from emotional to economic. This desire is combined with a situation of vulnerability because they feel that, since they are not a biological member of the family, their being accepted as a full member of the (adoptive) family is not completely assured, as it is for the family's biological members. In this sense, the reunion (with the biological family) has probably weakened their emotional security with the adoptive family, as it has offered the adoptive family possible motives to set the young person apart from the rest of the (adoptive) family. This is why the young people feel vulnerable and put in a difficult situation. A common reaction to this is the young person's desire to confirm his loyalty to the adoptive family and to obstruct or pay little importance to the relationship to the biological family.

The issue of inheritance may be an important issue for these young people, though this was not explored in the case study. It would have been very difficult to discuss as it is a sensitive issue which, if raised, might have caused worry and distress. In El Salvador, inheritance is often not arranged beforehand and is sorted out after the parents' death. The adoptive parents of the children we interviewed were still relatively young (mostly 40–55 years old), so the issue had probably not arisen in a practical sense. There is less likely to be a problem in those cases where the adopted child is the only child.

Support Networks and Survival Skills

Most of the young people interviewed signalled that their key support network had been their adoptive family. Unlike those children who grew up in orphanages and institutions, they generally did not construct a very significant support network outside of the nucleus of the people they lived with. That family was supposed to play the same role a biological family did, and was normally embraced by the children to do so. Another support network mentioned was religion:

> *My (adoptive) family gave me everything. I didn't need anything else, except for them. They also gave me a very religious upbringing. I was a member of the Catholic church and now a belong to an Evangelical church. I was part of the choir, the youth group, lecture groups; I was quite involved. They taught me to love my neighbour and not to hold a grudge against anyone. It helped me a lot to value all of this. I am proud because I don't have any vices. I hope to bear good fruits*

Some of the survival skills mentioned were "to forget", "to adapt to the new situation", "to play with other children" and "to try and be a good son". Specifically, some said they liked to be distracted, to fantasize, watch a television show they liked, anything that would help them not to think about what happened. Others proposed that the memory of their (biological) family helped them to survive and grow up. To go to school and to learn how to work were also mentioned as useful tools to overcome their situation:

> *I always wanted to see what my mother looked like, if only in dreams, to see her face. When I was younger I always had this thought: to see what she was like. And I created my fantasies. At a later age, I arrived at the conclusion that I really did not remember what she looked like. I remembered how she used to hold me, how she used to rock me to sleep in a hammock, but I had forgotten what she looked like*

Curiously enough, the same person who proposed "forgetting" as a survival skill, also described how she clung to her (birth) mother's image throughout the years. Often, a paradox between "remembering" and "forgetting" is present in the testimonies:

> *I remembered my (birth) mother, but I didn't feel much, because I no longer had her around. But the day she died I was crying, when my (adoptive) father came and picked me up (he was a soldier and picked the girl up after a massacre). Afterwards, since they would never ask me (about my family), nor tell me anything else, I started to forget my mother. That's how I started to forget. I told myself: "If my (adoptive) mother doesn't ask, I am not going to tell her anything". That's as far as it went*

Once an older age was attained, forming a family of one's own was proposed as a way to overcome the different problems faced as a child:

> *To find my partner and have children together was my most important impulse to continue struggling for a better life. (Now) I have a family to stand up for, a family of my own*

Also the thought of "one day" being able to find the missing biological family was a strong motivation for some of the young people:

> *I thought they could be alive or dead and I used to think: "If my mother is alive, she probably thinks the same of me (that I can be dead or alive)". I never blamed them for what happened and, before finding them, seeing them again was always my biggest dream*

In at least one case the skills of survival, were more like the "skills of despair":

> *What I did is that everything I felt, I tried to hide from everybody else. I didn't have anyone to talk to, because of my situation, so I spent ten years going from here to there, always on the run. I got involved with drugs, I got involved with gangs. I felt every day was the last day of my life*

8. Growing up on a Military Base

A different scenario is that of children abducted in military operations and left to stay indefinitely at the military base. These children grew up in a military environment during a time of war. Too small to be soldiers, they were messengers, shoeshine boys, mascots or just simply “the kids around” on the barracks’ restricted grounds. The childhood years of these children were marked by the war, not only in the face of the separation from the family, but also after their disappearance, in a day-to-day life marked by war and violence:

> *We couldn’t cross the river… so we isolated ourselves in a certain zone in order to hide and protect ourselves from the Armed Forces, but they found us and there they killed my mother, my younger brother and two women who were with my mother. Maybe because the soldiers thought we were too young to be blamed for what was going on, they didn’t kill my brother or me. Then they thought of taking us to the military headquarters and they made us get into a helicopter... The idea of the chief in command wasn’t for us to stay there … (but) things didn’t turn out as they planned… Maybe they thought that if they took us somewhere else, we weren’t going to be raised well, and we weren’t going to have everything we needed… So he (the Air Force commander) decided to leave us there on the Air Force Base*

Mauricio and Amilcar G, brothers abducted by the Armed Forces in the 1980 Sumpul massacre[93], were taken to Air Force base of Ilopango, San Salvador. During the massacre the two brothers, 5 and 8 years old, had witnessed the murder of their mother and their little two-year-old brother. Amilcar and Mauricio stayed on the Air Force base for twelve years, until after the Peace accords, after which they had to provide for themselves economically:

> *From when I was five until I was seventeen I lived with the staff and with the patients at the base’s infirmary. I saw a lot of dead bodies. If there were many casualties they used to pile them up in the hallway. We had to walk through the place to get to the dormitory we used. You could almost say that I became insensitive to death. I lived by the clock of the Infirmary and the rest of the base. Sometimes somebody from the Infirmary’s personnel would take us for a short trip outside of the barracks, but that was it. There were months in which we did not leave the place at all. The Air Force commander made sure we went to school. The Air force paid for our studies until me and my brother finished high school*

Apart from these brothers, PRO-BUSQUEDA has also documented information about other similar cases of children who grew up on military bases during the war:

93 The Sumpul Massacre, May 14 1980, was the first large-scale massacre of campesinos in El Salvador. Honduran Army troops closed the border with El Salvador along the Sumpul river and the Salvadoran Army and National Guard attacked the refugees camped on the Salvadoran side of the river. Over 600 people were killed.

Here at the Chalatenango military base there were many children. They would run errands for the soldiers and they were paid with some spare change… We were allowed to meet with them to play football… They would tell us a little about their background and I found out there were several children that didn't have a mum or dad. We are talking about 1984, 85, 86 or around those dates… Some said that they (their parents) had been killed

Amilcar demonstrates gratitude for the support he has received from some of the Armed Forces' members, but he emphasises that the army base was a very inappropriate place for him to grow up in. He and other children grew up in the barracks surrounded by the images of violence of which his own parents had been victims. He affirms that his personal history was a sort of taboo even on the base. In the hands of his captors he could not claim justice for his mother's and brother's murders or even mourn their loss.

Experiences of Care

PRO-BUSQUEDA has been able to document only a few cases of children actually growing up on a Salvadoran army base. In only two of these cases the children actually grew up on the base and stayed there until they were adults. However, many of the young people spent some time there after the family separation, and stayed for periods of time ranging from a few hours to several months, and possibly longer. In the interviews, when we asked about their placement in a new environment, several of the young people first narrated their experience with the soldiers. Their interpretation of the events reflected sheer terror in most cases:

They screamed at us: "Get up, kids, don't you want to go." My brother's shirt was soaked with blood, but not his own, that of my mother, who was lying there motionless, still holding on to my little brother. The bullets had hit them both. They (the soldiers) dragged us to a field where the helicopters were waiting. They pushed us. I thought they were going to kill us. They were making fun of us, "Here are the guerrillas" they laughed. One of them urinated on my head, laughing

This sense of terror, the idea that they were going to be murdered is also present in the testimonies of other people, including Vitelio[94].

But the soldiers presented various attitudes towards the children. Some actually tried to soothe the children and relieve some of their anxiety:

When you are small you can change your mood from one moment to the other. That's what the soldiers did. At first we were terrified. But then they said: "Don't worry we are going to take you to your mother." Who knows, maybe we believed them

94 See his Life Story

Another girl remembered the soldiers telling her constantly they were going to take her to her family, in order to keep her calm. Her words also indicated some of the contradictions the soldiers must have felt while these operations (in which children were separated from their families) were taking place:

> *One of the soldiers was always by our side. I think he felt sorry for us. There were only children. The only adults around were the soldiers and some women who cooked for them. We were forced to call them "Nanny"[95]. They (the soldiers) promised us that they would take us to our families. But it was all a lie. Actually, we were there being held hostage. We weren't allowed to go outside of the base*

Also, a certain sense of relief was to be detected in at least one of the interviews, marking the entrance into the military camp as an end to the worst and more immediate suffering:

> *I said to myself: "I have to present myself, I have to go there, even if they kill me". But I didn't tell them my family had anything to do with the guerrillas. He (the army official) said: "What happened to you?" I looked terrible. I had spent many days running. I cried so he wouldn't hit me. "Look I have lost my mom and dad", I lied to them, because I told them they (my parents) were with the army. Otherwise they wouldn't give me food and clothing, they would beat me. I felt so relieved when they accepted me[96]*

> *They treated me well in the base, in Gotera; at least no beatings or anything like that. I actually liked being there, they would let me watch television, that was something I hadn't seen before[97]*

Mauricio and Amilcar G – Eleven Years in a Military Base

While there are several sources to be found about how the children were treated during the initial period, right after the family separation, sources about long-term care for children on military bases are very scarce. PRO-BUSQUEDA has only documented two cases of children actually growing up on the military base, although other cases have probably existed. Mauricio and Amilcar G, the two brothers who grew up on the Salvadoran Air Force base near the capital, spending eleven years there, are almost the exclusive source for the information further discussed in this section.

The two brothers suffered severe trauma from witnessing the murder of their mother and their younger brother, miraculously saving themselves from the bullets. When the helicopter dropped them off at the Air Force base, they were fed and then taken to the infirmary:

95 In Spanish, 'nana', a word often used in the countryside for of grandmother and sometimes mother.
96 See Life Story Emiliano
97 See Life Story Esteban

They gave us clean clothes and I just kept on crying for my mother. An official told me not to cry. I was ill with the 'flu and they gave me some pills that got rid of my cough very rapidly. They must have been very good pills, but I was still very sad. They gave us a bed to sleep in. I didn't sleep all night thinking about my mother. For one or two years, every time I thought about my mother I would cry. An official who was there would sometimes take us to his house and when we were in his home, everybody was eating, I started crying because I was thinking about my mother. He used to try and put me at ease

Adaptation

Amilcar and Mauricio were presented to the entire staff of the Air Force base at the next inspection. The commander of the base presented them himself and made it clear that these children were survivors and were under his protection. During the first few months at the base, rumour had it the two children were going to be adopted to a German family residing in El Salvador at the time. Apparently, the plan fell through, although the children did not know about it at the time. So they stayed and acquired a strange kind of status, living in the infirmary with the nurses and the patients, sleeping in a hospital bed; sometimes even their food would be taken to them together with the food for the patients. Other times they went to the base's kitchen to eat.

Gradually the children explored the base and made personal acquaintance with the personnel. When the nurses and the aviation mechanics discovered they knew how to sing revolutionary songs they had learned from the time they were still with their family in Chalatenango, they were not punished for it, but rather encouraged to sing. Mauricio and Amilcar would sing songs of protest while being publicly mocked and secretly admired by some. In exchange for their performance, the children would receive coins to buy sweets. The singing stopped almost half a year after it had started, when one of the officials prohibited them from continuing.

Perceptions of Care

Family-like attention was not the rule but rather the exception, especially as the two children grew older and lost their "novelty" status. Just like everybody else, the children would address the people they had contact with on the base by their military rank and last name. After receiving some toys and even a child's bicycle each when they first arrived, gifts soon became an extreme scarcity. After the first few years, outings from the base became rare; the most common ones being the pilots taking them with them for flight practice or non-combat missions.

We used to get really bored. So we started hanging out near the pilots to see if they would take us flying. That was fun. But usually, I felt quite lonely. I didn't know what to do with my spare time. When we had a day off (from school), there was nothing to do

Like many young people who were placed in residential institutions, these boys grew up without knowing what family life was like:

> *During all the years at the Army base, I forgot what it is like to live like a family. I don't know what a loving family looks like. Sometimes they would take my brother and me for a visit to the families of the officers from the base, but we never established a special bond with any family. We were children living like recruits, for years on end. The warmth and loving a family can give you, that is something I will probably never experience. I have managed to go forward in life, but I feel I am different from the rest of the people*

The relationship between the two brothers suffered from the lack of affection that both received. Although they would always continue to support each other in times of need, they grew more distant in time. And both felt very lonely, especially in their early teenage years.

Amilcar and Mauricio grew up with the images of war's destruction always present in the infirmary; the patients, their wounds and their stories, and the dead that would be taken to the infirmary whenever casualties occurred involving aeroplanes, helicopters or personnel from the base:

> *Sometimes the bodies were wrapped in plastic body bags, and sometimes not. You would see faces, or body parts, all burnt up, unrecognisable. They would leave them in the passage way. We had to pass through in order to get to our room. And at night, we had to go out again to the passageway in order to go to the bathroom. It was scary to us. When there were bodies, I would hold off peeing as long as I could*

Even though they expressed that the material care had been sufficient, since they had enough to eat, health care, clothes etc. the brothers did feel oppressed by the strict manner in which everything was offered to them:

> *We couldn't say anything, or have our own taste, ask for things we wanted. We just had to accept whatever they gave us*

The Air Force arranged for the brothers to go to school, first outside the base until ninth grade and then inside the base, in the technical school of aviation, to train them as maintenance personnel. When they graduated they were given a job at the military base and with their income they were able to rent a place and live outside of the base for the first time. They had spent 11 years inside: the brothers are now nineteen and sixteen years old, respectively.

Identity

The issue of identity has been a complicated one for Mauricio and Amilcar, even if they never did lose their names. The problem centred on the identification with an institution which was responsible for the family tragedy. Amilcar affirmed that his personal history was a sort of taboo even on the base. In order to fit in, the brothers tried to become part of this institution as much as they could:

I didn't like walking around in my school uniform or civilian clothes, because everybody else was dressed in military uniform, even the nurses. So when I had grown enough to be able to fit into a uniform I started wearing one. It made me feel better

They were, however, aware of the dangers posed by the possibility of the guerrillas attacking the base:

If the guerrillas managed to take over the base, they would kill us (my brother and me) just the same. Once inside they wouldn't stop to ask questions, they would just go ahead and kill everybody

But the brothers never did forget they were different. They tried to find a balance between belonging to the base and validating their own personal history. They never accepted certain aspects of the army, such as the army's official rendering of what had happened to them:

When the General read the report about what supposedly had happened to us, that we were found "in abandonment" by a unit of soldiers, I asked to speak. I told him that it was true that the army had helped us and that I was grateful for that, but I couldn't accept him calling "abandonment" the way that they had murdered my mother and my little brother

The brothers did feel like orphans because they had witnessed their mother's death. However

Nobody would call us orphans, but unconsciously everybody knew that that was what we were. In school I felt very different, because I didn't have parents or anything. I had nothing to tell my classmates. I could only talk about the classes, nothing else

Support networks and survival skills

The survival skills that these two youths mentioned were "honouring the memory of our mother" and trying to find our family again. The brothers actively searched for their relatives and eventually, through PRO-BUSQUEDA in 1994, found their uncle, their mother's brother, who had been their father figure when growing up with their mother.

Characteristically, Amilcar and Mauricio lacked a support network during their time in the army base. In their opinion, the Air Force did leave them one positive legacy: a profession. Both brothers work in aviation maintenance, the oldest is still at the Air Force base and the younger works for a company servicing a local private airliner. Mauricio reflected

Economically, life would probably be more difficult in Chalatenango

Amilcar agreed but added:

We will never know what would have become of us if all this hadn't happened

9. A Comparative Analysis of Care and Protection Issues

Introduction

In this chapter the findings of the previous sections on alternative care in adoptive families overseas, in informal adoptive families in El Salvador, in orphanages and on the military bases are compared. This analysis is the product of the work of the researchers and of the group of young people who themselves experienced disappearance and grew up apart from their families. The chapter also draws on the accumulated experience of PRO-BUSQUEDA. Many of the young people found by PRO-BUSQUEDA have participated in workshops, therapeutic groups and social outings with other young people. It is the accumulation of these spaces of reflection that allowed those participating in this case study to evaluate their personal experiences in comparison with those of their peers.

Piece by piece, the young people involved in this analysis shaped a historical retrospect, passing on from a subjective personal experience to a more objective general reflection on the care provided for the children separated during the Salvadoran civil war, in their different situations. Again, the young people who grew up in the orphanage and the military base were the most active and vocal participants in these discussions. The common starting point, something that all of those participating agreed about, was that what happened to them "never should have happened". The separation, often triggered by the assassination of one or several family members, was the worst possible point of departure in life. For most, conditions improved for them afterwards, and the alternative care helped them overcome an important part of the trauma.

The importance of the reflections of these young people does not only reside in its historical perspective on children's care in wartime Salvadoran society; what these young people experienced during their childhood also determines their present reality. In the case of El Salvador's disappeared children the present ties to the past calamities often continue to be overwhelming. For a few, the following events were marked as well by pain and humiliation, and the past trauma is just as relevant today as it was when the separation occurred.[98]

This chapter looks first at the quality of care received by these young people in their different situations, and it then looks at the issue of abuse and exploitation. A long section on the complex issues of identity, security and family reunion follows: next comes a discussion of the need for the regularisation of adoption, and an analysis of the inadequacies of institutional forms of care. Next the question is posed "Could the disappearances have been prevented? There is a short discussion of gender issues and finally we examine young people's support networks and their coping and resilience.

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Quality of Care

Except for those few cases where children were actually taken in informal adoption to be exploited, normally the local families adopted the children in order to make them part of their family. The standard of care generally seems to have been either very good, or overtly abusive or exploitative. This rather “black and white” situation was unexpected and difficult to account for. There are two likely explanations. First, many of the families who took in the children had the idea that adopting a child meant taking a child in and treating him or her as they would treat their biological son or daughter. This means that they really wanted a child and that they felt able (emotionally and economically) to take care of them. These children were unlikely to be exploited or abused. It is a wholly different story when the adoptive family’s motivation is to benefit from the child economically. There may be a third factor, related to the loyalty the young people feel towards their adoptive family. Even if some may have been abused in one way or the other, they seem to feel the need to project a positive image of the adoptive family towards outsiders, because they somehow want to defend their claims of being part of that family: this may have resulted in an under-reporting of negative experiences of care.

They received adequate material living conditions. Most said they felt they were well taken care of and that they felt loved and appreciated. Differences with other members of the family did occur, but were usually not intentional or systematic. The young people are generally very grateful towards their adoptive families, though there are some exceptions to this – especially those who experienced abuse or exploitation.

As a rule, the foreign adoptive families provided the children with abundant love, care and support. Both materially and emotionally the children were well taken care of, and the initial anxiety related to leaving El Salvador and not speaking the language of the family was usually quickly overcome. Obviously, material living conditions were beyond what a regular Salvadoran child could dream of.

Some of the young people who grew up in orphanages or at a military base said they would have preferred to be sent for adoption to a foreign country, because of the opportunities this would have offered them. However, when they were children, international adoption seemed more of a scary thought to them. Others placed more importance on having had the opportunity to stay in the country and to remain close to the (birth) family, even if their whereabouts were unknown at the time.

Even in the difficult circumstances of the war, the quality of the material care in the orphanages was acceptable, with a few exceptions, mainly referring to conditions of hygiene. The problems resided mainly in the emotional aspects of care. The children who grew up in orphanages often felt unloved, unwanted and lonely. Physical and emotional abuse were all too common, especially in some of the institutions. Additionally, they were branded as orphans and subject to strong social discrimination. The children felt this discrimination especially in social situations outside of the orphanage, such as school and in the surrounding communities.

The quality of care varied from one institution to another and from one individual caretaker to the other. The young people claimed the treatment depended too much on individuals rather than institutional responsibility. Caretakers were not screened or trained adequately to deal with children. Much less were they equipped to handle cases of children who have suffered trauma. Professional supervision of the quality of care was never available.

In a way very similar to an orphanage, the material conditions for the children who grew up at a military base were adequate, though minimal. However, emotional care was even scarcer than in the orphanages. No real caretakers were appointed; relations with adults were tied to a framework of a military work environment. The children were actually put unnecessarily in danger as they were growing up in an environment not offering even minimal security for children.

Abuse and Exploitation

Attention should be drawn to the fact that cases of physical abuse and exploitation did take place, with all of its terrible consequences for the children who suffered it. The lack of protection towards "orphans" in general is such that little has been done to combat this practice, not just in relation to the war situation. The informal adoptive families' motives for taking in the child were never reviewed at the time of the events. With no supervision by the authorities or by the community of how the children were treated, abuse was able to become as severe and systematic as it did in some of the cases described.

General humiliating punishments were not uncommon in almost all of the institutions the participating young people had been staying in. A general cultural acceptance of physical punishment and the absence of proper training of personnel were the factors the young people signalled as catalyst of abuse. Also corruption was singled out as it led to what the young people interpreted as forced child labour in at least one orphanage[99]. Many things that went on in the orphanages were never the subject of monitoring or evaluation by a more or less independent institutions. In the opinion of the young people involved, supervision or control of the orphanages is almost non-existent:

> *How are the people from the government going to supervise what is going on in the different orphanages of the country if they can't even run their own orphanages properly? Every kid who has been around in the institutions knows that the places the government runs are some of most corrupt ones*

There was no evidence of abuse or exploitation in those families from overseas who adopted children, but among the local informal adoptions, some examples of serious and systematic abuse were encountered, mainly in the form of gross exploitation of the child's labour but sometimes accompanied by severe emotional abuse. It was surprising that we did not encounter more situations in which the child was adequately cared for physically but who suffered discrimi-

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nation in comparison with other children in the household. The relatively small and possibly biased sample may account for this.

Identity, Security and Family Reunion

In informal adoption situations, the young people's identification usually lay more with the adoptive family, even after the reunion with the birth family, after which most of the young people still use the names given to them by their adoptive family. They talk of a sense of belonging to their adoptive family, while the wartime family separation is often articulated as not being very significant. However, since the adoption was never formalised, an element of insecurity, both emotional and legal, is introduced into the identity issues. Questions such as: "Do they really consider me to be their own son?" can become haunting for the young people involved. Comments such as this are illustrative of this process:

> *I began to think that she behaved in such a way because I was not really her son*

Issues such as the lack of information about the child's background did not emerge from the local adoptive families. Their intent centred around building a complete self-sustaining life alternative for the adopted child, not requiring any element of the child's background to be integrated; not the name, not the place of origin, not their personal history. There were, however, a few exceptions to this: a few adoptive families encouraged the child to remember the biological family and in some cases offered to help the child search for them. In most cases, the adopters saw themselves as permanently replacing the birth family. This explains why many adoptive families did not tell the children about their adoptive status. It also explains why most adoptive families decided to change the name to one of their choice. These acts indicate that the adoptive families proposed to achieve a rupture with the child's past, rather than seeking some kind of continuity in the child's care. Adopters generally excluded the child's birth family both physically and psychologically.

Unlike local adoptive families, foreign adoptive families considered that access to information on the birth family to be a relevant issue in the adoptive family/child relationship. Unfortunately, in the case of El Salvador, very little information was available and sometimes the information given to the adoptive family was false. The families who participated in this case study all indicated they would like to have had more information on the child's origins.

The difference between local and foreign adoptive families is striking. In international adoption the child's past is not considered to be a potential threat in the family relationship, but instead is identified as a fundamental right of the adoptive child. Two of the three adoptive families even respected the first name the child already had rather than renaming the child altogether.

The above does not necessarily mean the foreign adoptive families had more altruistic motives than local adoptive families. The distinction is twofold. On the one hand, the foreign families were better informed about adoption, its conse-

quences and some basic mental health aspects. In addition, because the child looked different from the adopters, the reality of adoption could not be concealed. On the other hand, these families had less reason to feel threatened by a possible biological family because of the legal status of the adoption and because of the physical and cultural distance between the countries involved. This is discussed further below.

When informal adoptions took place, a war was going on, weakening even more the already shaky institutional basis of the Salvadoran society. However, such informal adoptions could also take place today, without raising many questions. The Salvadoran civil registration system is by no means fraud-proof. People often consider registering a child with a false identity as a more viable solution than trying to make an adoption or care arrangement through legal means. Fear of having to spend money or having the child taken away from them are the most important motives.

As a result of PRO-BUSQUEDA's intervention, an apparent conflict occurs between the child's right to an identity and the child's right to security. When the truth does come out, it provokes a difficult and complicated situation, and implies that the child's situation was actually irregular to begin with. The informal status of the adoption is a latent conflict in the relationship between the adoptive family and the child, in this case triggered by the family reunion; but it could also be triggered by other situations. The irregularity of the adoption itself contradicts the child's right to security. Even if the children involved are now adults, a positive step that would both serve the right to identity as well as the right to security would be to legalise the adoption, with the biological family's consent.

The selection process, preparation and education experienced by those who were adopted legally seems to have been significant, though clearly variable. In the local adoptions, the decision to take in the child was often made in a very short period of time, and there was no selection process other than the family's willingness to take in a child. However, there is probably an even greater psychological difference in the fact that the adoption is not legally established. The act of spontaneous adoption may have some socially-praised altruistic elements in it, but it is also illegal, and may become in time a sort of a *family secret* which everyone in the family knows about but no-one talks about. This is especially true for middle class families, more aware of the legal implications of the act of adoption, and more so if the truth is hidden from the child and he or she is raised under the misconception that he or she is in fact a biological child of this family. It seems likely that this irregular and hidden situation is a threat to the relationship in the long run and renders the local adoptive family's care vulnerable to outside elements that may trigger the appearance of the truth. This threat does not exist in international adoption because they are oriented to tell their children the truth about the adoption – and in any case it would usually be almost impossible to hide because of physical differences between the adoptive parents and the adopted child. Furthermore, the relationship has a legal basis. These two elements, the truth and the legal basis of adoption seem to be crucial to the success of the relationship between adoptee and adopters.

The young people who grew up in orphanages did not consider themselves to have much of an identity problem, because they had never really accepted the identity they grew up with: that of being labelled an "orphan". The fact that these children were separated from their families in the course of the war and were deemed to be the children of the guerrillas made this social discrimination more specific and blatant. It must have been terribly cruel for the children to be told that they were the children of "terrorists" and "murderers", especially considering the hardship suffered with the families before the separation; scenarios in which the "murderers" were, in reality, the government agents.

The young people who grew up in the orphanages consider themselves to be survivors and to carry the "wounds of the past." The young people characterised themselves as having been "quiet children, always marginalised". They and the two young men who grew up on the military base were the only ones to talk about "true identity", referring to bonds with the biological family and to using their original given name to make such a statement. However, many of them had experienced curious and seemingly unnecessary changes to their names during their childhood.

Most of the issues identified by the young people from the orphanages were also confirmed by those who grew up in the military base. In their interpretation, the military base was just another "institution", similar to the orphanages, although different in that there were only two of them.

Some informal adoptive families, a minority, received the news from PRO-BUSQUEDA and the birth family with relief, but the majority with anxiety. As a rule, the young people who grew up with informal adoptive families had had notably less success in the family reunion process with the biological family than other groups, including international adoption. In some of these cases, the cultural and physical proximity of the biological family may be sensed as a threat, as the children are more clearly confronted with their privileged position within a Salvadoran middle-class family, as opposed to the poverty-stricken reality of their *campesino* biological family. The idea of "what could have been" and "what might be if the adoptive family turns their back on them" acquires a concrete dimension, often interpreted as threatening. In this sense, the contradictions between the child's roots and self-perception generated an active emotional conflict, almost invariably unresolved. On the other hand, children who grew up in the orphanages generally did not lose the sense of belonging to the biological families' social reality, as they were constantly reminded in the orphanage of their family's humble background. And in the case of the children who grew up with adoptive families abroad, the social reality of their biological family in El Salvador is too far off to be interpreted as threatening to them, as they have already acquired the nationality and habits of a different, more prosperous, society.

Some of the young people who grew up in the orphanages explained the identity problem of the (informal or local) adoptees as follows:

> *Many of the young people have not been able to construct a good relationship with their biological family. Sometimes, they still feel they are to blame for what happened. In other cases the (biological) family's economic status is a factor; if this is very low, some young people have a hard time accepting this*

Two issues mentioned have a lot to do with the adoptive family's attitude, first of all towards the events related to the war and second towards the issue of poverty (as the above quote illustrates) which was a day-to-day reality for almost half of the country's population. Accepting the biological family may mean having to accept an interpretation of the country's historical and political reality that is different from that portrayed by the adoptive family. A strong conflict of loyalty appears on the scene, making a spontaneous rebuilding of family bonds impossible.

Ultimately, the informality of the initial adoption arrangement becomes a key factor in this stage of family reintegration. The fact that the adoption was never formally arranged is a major element of doubt and distress in defining the family relationship under new terms. Suddenly the possible fragility and relativity of family bonds confront the young person from both sides. Often, the family reunion proves to be much more complicated than initially anticipated. Even though the children interviewed were reluctant to talk about this, it was sensed that issues that had not come up before the biological family appeared on the scene (such as whether he or she will be treated equally to the rest of the adoptive family members in the future) may become a source of additional concern. The young people's emotional security is under siege, as they doubt both their true status within the adoptive family as well as their position within the biological family, where emotional bonds are still very weak.

In many cases, the years of denial of the biological family's existence did leave important emotional marks, and makes it harder for the young people to reconstruct their lives after the reunion. Rather than seeing meeting the biological family as "enrichment", it is seen as a complication, often because of the pressure it puts on the relationship with the adoptive family. The adopted children perceive a sort of family "limbo", and they are afraid of losing the support network they have built upon all these years with the adoptive family. This perception is a result of how family relations have developed over the years, and indicates that more problems exist than those that meet the eye.

It is very apt, however, to share the words of a young man whose adoptive family has been actively supportive of him building a relationship with his biological family, and how this has been a healing experience for all those involved:

> *I am very happy that between both families (the adoptive and the biological) there is good understanding and communication. I have given both my mothers a place in my heart. I feel I should not be indifferent to any of them. One family, because they took care of me, they saw me grow up, and the other because they gave me life. I love both my families and I think they are beginning to care for each other as well*

This positive outcome of a family reunion of an informally adopted young person is the exception to the rule. Most of the adopters have "lived a lie" in denying the reality of the child's family of origin, with the reunion proving to be an unwelcome intrusion of truth into a stable but irregular situation.

In cases of international, legal adoption, the biological family may be perceived initially with some distrust, but generally not as a possible threat because of the

privileges the child has gained with the adoptive family. In this sense, the cultural distance makes approximation less dangerous. Apart from aspects related to the quality of the affectionate relationship existing between the child and the adoptive family, the fact that the family relationships are backed up by a formal legal adoption makes the bond less fragile.

A few adoptive families, though not those interviewed for this case study, have demonstrated worry that the biological family's interest in contacting their child might be economic. Lack of knowledge about El Salvador's civil war and other publicised international adoption cases where this has occurred are the basis of such worries. In all cases, PRO-BUSQUEDA has proved to be a necessary intermediary to help clarify doubts and facilitate the cross-cultural communication between the families involved.

Sometimes, after the youth's reunion with the biological family, the "loyalty" issues we described in the section regarding informal adoptive families are also relevant for those adopted in foreign countries, although generally the adoptive family tends to view the biological family as less of threat. International adoptive families perceive themselves to be in a stronger position as they have the legal status of the adoption, a more favourable economic position and the fact that their adoptive child has been acculturated in their environment and language. The young people involved usually do not even speak Spanish. Almost without exception, those families who decided to visit El Salvador and make the reunion possible have expressed very positive reactions to it.

The orphanage was never a "real" family for any of the children, so when the opportunity for a family reunion arose, the young people were often eager to take it. After growing up with this stigma for many years, many do not consider themselves "orphans" anymore. Almost invariably, they see the biological family as an important enrichment in their life, using words such as strength and belonging in respect of their family. Naturally, a conflict between families does not occur because only one family is involved.

An important ethical issue is raised by PRO-BUSQUEDA'S intervention: the organisation takes the view that it is in the best interest of the child both for PRO-BUSQUEDA and for the judicial system to intervene, for several reasons; knowing the truth, however painful, is the child's right. The biological family who lost the child because of abduction or other events beyond their control also has the right to know what happened to the child and to re-establish contact with him or her. The child's right to an identity is a basic right under the UN CRC, as is the right to family reunification.

However, some basic rules need to be respected regarding PRO-BUSQUEDA's or anyone else's intervention in these cases. One is respect for the existing relationship between the adoptive parents and child. Another one is to work with a flexible and somewhat lengthy time-table that allows for sufficient time for the adoptive family and child to assimilate the events. Also, adequate psychological attention should be available for all those involved. PRO-BUSQUEDA currently applies these principles. The State should provide the legal basis for this process, complying with the formal aspects of the child's right of identity and establishing the rules for family reunions in case the adoptive and biological

family and the child do not reach a mutual agreement.

Another conclusion is that there is a need to accompany these complicated cases with counselling and ensure that family visits are conducted with professional support and mediation for all those involved, including the adoptive family.

The Need to Regularise Adoption

The conclusions drawn by foreign adoptive families centred on the right of access to information. The families interviewed considered the right to information crucial for the child and even for the child's relationship with the adoptive family.

> *Give them full access (to information about their past). It's their right as a human being to know all they can about their past. Trying to cover up the past only builds resentment. You can't build a relationship with someone when the cornerstone of that relationship was built on a lie*

This insightful conclusion would apply equally to the informal adoption situations. No adoption should take place without proper parental consent or following exhaustive inquiries. If for different reasons these inquiries or procedures were impossible during the war, now that the conflict has ended, additional efforts need to be made to regulate the situation of those children who were informally adopted. This recommendation would also imply the need to clarify the whereabouts of children separated from their families because of the war and should constitute a combined effort to repair the damage and to regulate the care situations, ensuring added stability for the young person's future.

The particular experience of overseas adopters interviewed for this study had made them question the quality of the service provided by adoption agencies. The lack of confidence reflects the existence of a confidence crisis in international adoption, based on personal experience as well as the numerous cases of irregularities that have come out in the media. As one adopter told us

> *I don't trust the adoption agencies*

Naturally, the phenomenon of El Salvador's disappeared children does not improve the reputation of international adoption, as the means used for finding and obtaining children are questioned. However, it must be made clear that to a much larger extent than in any of the other categories, the children were well taken care of. They normally considered themselves to be fortunate, and even the biological family often shared that same perception. The fact that the adopters were selected and prepared by agencies and local authorities for the adoption provided a basis of security on the receiving end of the adoption.

As PRO-BUSQUEDA has been advocating, Salvadoran legislation should be adapted to the reality of disappeared children and alternative care. Even if there has been some improvement over the years in the legislation on adoption (both

national and international), the enforcement of the law leaves a lot to be desired. According to the current Salvadoran legislation, each adoption is to be officially evaluated by social workers and other professionals, and the procedure includes examining the adopters' economic and emotional capacity to take on the task. However, local adoptions are rarely formalised officially, and the practice of *de facto* adoption that occurred during the war is likely to continue today, now with children separated from their families because of circumstances not related to the war. Also the legal system has not been able to respond adequately to the cases PRO-BUSQUEDA presented to them, showing a lack of interest in these cases and sometimes indicating a lack of resources.

In order for local adoption to be an effective and responsible solution for children who lost their families, the regulations that apply need to be implemented, the biological family traced if possible, the adopters evaluated and prepared for the adoption and the adoption monitored adequately.

There is a need to improve the law of civil registration and ensure more strict enforcement. In the case of children separated from their families, their identity should be respected with the means available, leaving the space for immediate ratification once the necessary information becomes available. In the cases of the children who have been found, the State should guarantee their right to identity and facilitate the legal procedures to re-establish the child's full legal identity.

The Inadequacies of Institutional Forms of Care

The young people who grew up in the orphanages had the largest number of ideas on how to improve their actual situation and to avoid the past repeating itself in the future. They said that in each armed conflict there should be a neutral institution, preferably international, that should gather the children, take good care of them and search for their families. Basic children's rights such as described in the UN convention of 1989 should be respected under all circumstances. The entities they mentioned as having sufficient credibility to take on such a task were first the United Nations, specifically UNICEF, and second the International Red Cross.

Once the children are subject to alternative care away from their family, they should be provided not only with their material needs but also with emotional care. Psychological attention is important, especially in those cases where the children suffer trauma, but is

> *of little use if not accompanied by everyday affection*

Personnel who work in the orphanages should be trained in childcare and basic mental health issues. The orphanages should have a specific agenda to avoid discrimination and marginalisation of their children. More money should be invested in professional care, so that children may actually establish more personal bonds with their caretakers. Even in the homes offering a family-like, small group experience of care (such as in the SOS homes), the care received was seen as no substitute for the love and affection of a real family, and some young peo-

ple commented bitterly on the falseness of referring to their caretakers in terms such as “Mama” or “Daddy”.

Distressing examples of abuse and exploitation were encountered in this study – again reflecting a lack of proper management and accountability in residential care. Many of the young people talked of experiencing particular difficulties during their teenage years, reflecting both the inability of staff to cope with their changing behaviour and their own very uncertain sense of their future prospects outside of the institution.

It is self-evident that a military base is not an appropriate place for the children to grow up. The young people agreed with the conclusions of those who grew up in orphanages and added that the Armed Forces should never be allowed to take care of children in any way. If in their hands, they should immediately be passed on to a body that specialises in taking care of children.

Training in Human Rights and Children’s Rights should be included in all military training, in all the armies of the world, following the example of Save the Children’s work in West Africa. In El Salvador the military doctrine has changed as a result of the Peace Accords and now basic training in Human Rights is mandatory for all officers in the Army’s school. Children’s Rights, however, do not receive a specific focus. A good proposal would be to have a UN-sponsored international curriculum for Human Rights and Children’s Rights to be taught in all military schools around the world. There is a need for specific training in the effects of separation, the need to take steps to prevent separation and to carefully document situations where separation is unavoidable in order to facilitate family tracing.

The Right to Reparation

El Salvador’s disappeared children have the right to moral and material reparation. The young people claimed the best way for the government to recognise the damage inflicted is to set up a programme of economic support through scholarships etc., especially for those children who were separated from their families during the war. The fulfilment of the right of identity and family reunification should be part of this reparation. Children should not be forced to go back to live with their biological families, but be offered the emotional and economic support to be able to reintegrate with their biological family as much as they wish to do. Professional support for this process is required.

Could the Disappearances have been Prevented?

Was the disappearance of children in the Salvadoran civil war something that could have been avoided? And once separated from their families, could steps have been taken early on to return them to their families? The course of the war would have been different if the massive human rights violations were stopped on account of national and international pressure. In order to understand the logic of terror, one has to understand that it was a strategy applied to win the war, no matter the human cost. For example, the army opposed the International

Red Cross operating in the country during the worst years of political violence and the International Committee for the Red Cross opened a delegation in El Salvador only in 1983. A more humane scenario of the Salvadoran civil war might have been possible if many internal and international factors had coincided in a different way. But things being as they were and the US backing for the harsh strategy implemented by the army, the forced disappearance of children was just another component of terror's cruelty. In this kind of context, unfortunately, it is probably illusory to reclaim respect for children's rights from those whose very strategy was based on disrespect for human rights in general. This does not mean such claims should not be made, only that it is important to realise their limited reach. However, even within this scenario, the impact of the issue of disappeared children could have been much less dramatic if certain simple principles had been applied by relief workers.

For one, more adequate documentation of children separated from their families in the military bases, shelters and orphanages would have preserved vitally important information on the children and could have been used for more child-centred care planning. More active coordination between different organisations in El Salvador and in neighbouring countries such as in Honduras where many Salvadoran refugees ended up could have led to more systematic and effective family tracing: this should have involved the different orphanages as well as those organisations involved in family tracing. If these principles had been followed, many of the cases that PRO-BUSQUEDA is investigating or has solved only recently, could have been solved only weeks or months after the family separation. As a rule, it was not the dangers of war that inhibited relief workers search efforts; it was a lack of knowledge on the issue of child's separation and how to go about family tracing, combined with a lack of resources.

Gender Issues

In general it is difficult to draw conclusions about gender differences, as in both quantity of cases and type of care, there seems to be an equilibrium. From the evidence of this case study, those adopting, either in El Salvador or overseas, do not appear to display strong gender preferences. The numbers of boys and girls who disappeared seem to be almost equal. However, in quality of care, it may be possible to make some distinction from our sample. Those who talked about having been physically abused in the orphanages and some informal adoptive families were boys, except for one exception in the SOS orphanage – Andrea – who was treated badly by the woman who was fired when the director found out. Does this mean the girls were less abused? It is difficult to generalise from the sample included in this study. There may also be an issue of girls or young women being less willing to talk about abuse than males. Both girls and boys could be subject to labour exploitation by adoptive families, the latter in the fields and with the animals and the former in the household. It seems likely that this will have taken place, but very little documentation is available. The exception is the case explained on page 79 where the sister was sold to another family to help in the household.

Support Networks, Children's Coping and Resilience

In the case of both local and international adoption, the primary support network is identified as the adoptive family itself. However, in the cases of systematic abuse, the answer was "No support network." The young people clearly felt that within good adoptive families, no alternative support network was necessary. They socialised like other children, at school and within the community, and their lives were very much centred on the social spaces provided by the adoptive family.

In the orphanages, it was a different story. While alienation and loneliness were tough obstacles in their childhood, the other children, the fraternization, the sharing, the bonding, were the principal sources of strength that helped the children to get by. Hence, the main support networks were the other children. And while currently most children no longer have any bonds with the orphanage, they often still have contact with the children they grew up with.

Loneliness and despair marked the childhood years of those who spent many years on a military base, as they managed to adapt and fit into an environment hostile to children. The base provided a framework for survival, but the children's emotional needs were simply left unfulfilled. The lack of other children around to play with or to hang out with, made it even harder to find a network of some kind of emotional support.

The author's experience with PRO-BUSQUEDA has resulted in a considerable admiration for the strength and versatility shown by these children to overcome the adverse and extremely difficult circumstances they found themselves in. Their stories are inspiring rather than saddening. Their resilience and their ability to adapt to whatever circumstances they were forced to adapt to is indeed amazing and moving. This does not mean they did not suffer and they do not suffer the physical and emotional consequences of everything that happened to them. It simply confirms children's extraordinary resilience. The capacity of the two brothers to survive a long period in the privations of a military base (Chapter 8), and the solidarity and mutual support experienced among the peer-group in some of the institutions provide graphic examples. The study also encountered examples of situations in which children themselves, far from being passive victims of circumstances, played an active role in negotiating the best deal they could find: one child, for example, went out of his way to negotiate placement in a family (see page 72), while Esteban (see Life Story 2 in the Appendix) took the initiative to remove himself from an abusive situation and negotiated placement in an alternative family.

A group of young people who had experienced disappearance and were brought up away from their parents had the following to say[100]:

> *The legacy of the war, both physical and psychological, has not been erased, but is present in us, in our families and in so many other people. The pain it inflicted on our families accompanies us. Maybe it is necessary to say that we are entitled to this grief, because it is ours as well. Nevertheless, it is important to take*

100 "Historias para Tener Presente – "Stories to Bear in Mind" – will be published by UCA in 2002.

into account as well that there are cases in which grief, instead of doing damage, helps to heal. The truth is always preferable to uncertainty. Instead of hurting us, the understanding of what happened helps us to heal the wounds of the separation. And, at the end of this discovery process, the history of the family that used to embarrass us now fills us with pride.

Speaking from our experience, we can now say that our family is one of the most important things in life; there is nothing, no home, no institution that can replace our family. It is fundamental for any human being to know his or her roots and history, because these are transcendent components of our identity, of who we are and who we are to be. These are truths that nobody should be denied

Appendix: Life Stories of Disappeared Children

1. Emiliano

What first comes to my mind is my disappearance and the day I lost my parents. My family came from Usulután. I used to stay at home with mom. I was very young and could not handle a machete yet. We were a humble family who worked the land, but we had everything to eat, and were not considered a very poor peasant family. We had horses, cows, corn and beans, but we lost it all because of the war. We had no idea the soldiers were going to attack our village; we, the children, did not understand what was going on and when we came to our senses bullets were flying all around. It is scary and you do not know what to do, except for crying and asking yourself "Why are we at war?"

Death squads came and killed; they raped women and sometimes little girls, and for us to witness these atrocities was very painful. I cannot forget what my humble family went through. On the first attack, they burned our houses down and my father had the house rebuilt and again the soldiers burned it down. I was stranded in the war.

It was early in the morning when we started running away; we were starving, because we hadn't had anything to eat for three days. While everything was running, I saw some wild tomatoes and I stopped running and began eating them. Suddenly, the soldiers started shooting at me. I lifted my head to see what was going on and there was no one there. My father, mother and rest of the family had all continued running. I stayed behind all alone. I started crying and thought: "Where are they? What am I going to do? I am too young to take care of myself! Where should I go? Should I take the right or left path?" When you are lost and stranded you realise that you are nothing without your parents. I started calling out for my parents' help and could only hear my echo. The soldiers were coming nearer. Because I was little, I was able to hide myself under a big plant. The soldiers passed near me; I could not make noises or sudden moves, but inside I cried my heart out because I thought that if they'd find me, they'd kill me. They passed and did not see me. After a while I came out of my hiding place and started to walk. I roamed around for several days. I only ate fruits; at night I slept on top of a tree and in the morning time I kept walking and running, without knowing where I was going. The pain and suffering I felt because of not being with my mother and father I cannot describe. I wanted help. I couldn't stop crying.

I saw a house, surrounded by a small coffee plantation. It was really a nice place. I ran over there in order to ask for help, but when I got to the kitchen I saw a woman on the floor with her throat slit. I ran away frightened. I went to another house. What had happened here is that they had killed everybody just with bullets. I got more scared and ran away again.

That night I slept in the hole of an armadillo, trying to get away from the cold. Just before nightfall, I had seen that on the other side there was a military camp. I had seen two woman carrying around pots and pans and laughing. I didn't know what to do. I was in terrible shape and I felt that I wasn't going to survive

much longer. It was then that I said to myself: “I’ll go and talk to them, I don’t care if they kill me, I don’t have to keep on suffering, I will tell them I got lost and will not mention anything about my parents, otherwise they will kill me”.

So in the morning I walked up to the camp, starved and sick. Also I no longer had any clothes, they had been ripped off during some heavy thunderstorms. The soldiers actually received me well, especially the one in charge. They fed me, healed my wounds, got me clothes. I stayed there for a about a month and then they decided to take me to the hospital in Usulután. Believe it or not, leaving the camp was actually very sad for me; I was getting used to them and besides it was one more separation in my life. After two weeks in the hospital I was taken to another hospital in the capital of San Salvador. A judge took my case and transferred me to Rosa Virginia centre. There I stayed about two years. I didn’t like it. I could not go out and no one came to visit me; anyway, what could I do? Nothing!

After two years I was transferred to the Observation Centre for Minors. I stayed there for about 4 years. In there I spent time with children addicted to inhaling glue and children who had been in jail, some children who already had committed murder. It was like prison. They gave us very harsh punishments just as if we were inmates but at the same time it was like a house. I had friends whose parents came to visit them and I used to join them for the time of the visit. Those were the only times I felt being part of a family. My friend’s parents gave me confidence and strength to overcome the fact that I was alone and living in a place where I could not go out, not even to the corner shop.

In this country, children with no parents suffer a great deal. I always fantasised that one day I was going to be called over the microphone: “Emiliano M, your parents are here to pick you up”, but this never did happen. They were looking for me in other parts of the country, in Usulután, in San Miguel and in San Vicente, and it never came to their mind that I was in this place, trapped inside those four walls.

There was a social worker in the centre who asked me if I wanted to be adopted by people from another country. My answer was “Yes”. She said that she was going to do everything in her power to find me adoptive parents. It took two years for my adoption, paper work, you know. In 1986 my (adoptive) mother came to El Salvador, directly to adopt me. I was already about eleven years old then. During all this time I had only known her by photographs. At first it was hard to accept her, a women who was not really my mother. She spoke little Spanish and for a week we stayed in an hotel in El Salvador and then I was taken to France. I did not want to go with her. When I saw the aeroplane I felt very sad to be leaving my country. From this moment on, a different kind of burden began for me. I would never know if my parents were alive. I was leaving my good friends from the orphanage and my country. I was forced to leave everything behind. I left for France but felt like my roots were taken away from me.

Arriving in France was very hard. I had to learn a new language; I had to get use to other people and children my age discriminated against me over my skin colour, there was a lot of racism. My (adoptive) mother hired me a psychologist, but I didn’t want to obey and I’d just let her talk. I was still thinking as a Sal-

vadoran and I knew that I had to start thinking a bit more like a Frenchman and give my new life an opportunity. At age fourteen I began to discover how beautiful France was and all the opportunities it provided me with. In France I was so privileged; I had food and T.V. Everything was handed to me. At the age of 23, everything was going well; I had a T.V. set in my room, a great stereo, I had a motorcycle too. It was a great experience in France, a very refined culture. My (adoptive) family has given me a great deal of love, more than my Salvadorian family did. They have been great parents. The worst part was that I got used to getting things very easily, I found out that living in this country you get used to material things and that is not right. Sometimes I felt bad thinking that in El Salvador there are people who cannot have any of the things I had.

I was able to have El Salvador in my mind and to remember my native language, by listening to some "cumbia", "salsa" and "merengue" tapes I brought with me from El Salvador. I did not want to lose my language even though I was studying in French. My language gave me strength. I always missed my real parents; after many years my (adoptive) parents told me that it was time for me to visit El Salvador. At first I didn't want to come back, but my mother told me it was time to see how my country was.

In my stay here, the woman who had arranged my adoption asked me if I wanted to find my real parents and she said it could be done through PRO-BUSQUEDA. I told her "Yes", but I had many doubts they would be able to find them. It'd been quiet sometime and I thought they were all dead. How could I be sure, after all these years, that they were still alive? I wanted to find them but I thought it was hopeless.

PRO-BUSQUEDA got back in touch with me several months later, when my (adoptive) mother and I had already returned to France. They had found my mother. She and my brothers and sisters were alive and well! Only my father had been killed in the war. I arranged a trip to El Salvador soon after. It was a very nice feeling to visit my mother for the first time. It was fantastic and intense. I was so happy to be with her and at same time I felt sad to see that she had lost everything we had had before.

After the reunion I went back to France, but now I have returned to El Salvador to try and build up a life here. I am not sorry for the things I went through. My experiences have taught me a lot, maybe it was God's will to lose my family and find them again later. This way I could become a good person with excellent opportunities of education and employment. Now I have two family names, my birth name and my adopters' name: I like them both. They are my strength; the strength of two different families.

2. Esteban

That day our parents weren't around. It was just my grandparents taking care of us. The national guards passed through the village. They picked us up, just the three of us; I Esteban the oldest, my brother Ricardo and my sister Elsy, the youngest. We didn't see what they did to our grandparents.

They took us to the National Guard post in Osicala and there the three of us were separated. One of the national guards took Ricardo and a soldier took me

and transported me to the military base: the headquarters in Gotera. I stayed there for eight days and was treated well. Then they took me to the post outside by the airstrip and I was there for about eight days. Afterwards I was taken to the soldier's parents' house in Cacaopera. I stayed there for fifteen days. At first they made me feel welcome there, but the soldier started to say that he wanted to kill me. Who knows what happened? One of these days, his sister visited from Honduras and they asked her if she wanted to take me, because "Marino (the soldier's name) wants to kill the little boy; it is better that you take him to Honduras." And she took me to Honduras.

I lived close to the border (between El Salvador and Honduras) for about three years; three years of great suffering. At first everything was fine, there were lots of other children, but after a couple of days everything changed. The land had to be worked, growing corn, beans and much more. All I did was work, work and more work, and nothing was going well for me. They never bought me things and I was always put down, my food was limited. I worked a lot and fed little compared to the others in the house. The husband worked as an orderly at the village market and, very early in the morning, he would take me to sweep the floor of the entire market, even though he received the payment; I saw nothing of it.

All the other town's people were very friendly to me and there was a couple who gave me a pair of shoes and clothing, because they saw the shape I was in. But the lady who I was living with took them away from me. Everything given to me by others she took away from me and sold or gave to her own children. I suffered a great deal with this family. I was never at ease, they punished me all the time and very harshly.

The last time I was punished was when I went out late at night to the backyard with one of their sons; we had just gone to the toilet. They were real mad. Her husband grabbed a log of firewood and started hitting me with it, in the front and in the back. The lady was very worried, because I was not able to breathe any more. But her husband hit me once more in the back and at the same time he grabbed my hand and ripped off one of my finger nails. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't move, and the lady started to massage me and she brought me back to life. It was the last time they beat me. I ran away the next day. If not, God knows what would have happened to my life.

I left the village and walked through the wilderness. I got to a small road and I started walking straight down the road. I arrived at a house. I just stopped near the house and waited, very shyly. A girl and a boy came up to me and started asking me questions. I told them what had happened to me and they said that if I wanted to stay with them I was welcome in their home. I went in and the little boys who were there all smiled at me, we played and they fed me well. They changed my clothes and even gave me a pair of shoes.

I helped them with work to be done around the house. I took care of the cows. I was happy. The older brothers told me "From now on, we are going to be your parents, I will be your father, she will be your mother and they (the children) will be your brothers". Shortly after I started calling her "mother"; for me everyone who took care of me, I would call him or her "mother" or "father", even if

they treated me badly. In this house I enjoyed working, because they fed me the same as the other children. When I had to wake up very early in the morning to take care of the cows, they quickly offered me coffee and breakfast.

I believe I was ten years old when the person who is now my father arrived. He came from the northern coast of Honduras; he was the lady's cousin. He asked if she would be kind enough to give me to him. He was going to take care of me, put me into school and was going to provide me with everything. He had only three children, two girls and a boy, and by taking me he would complete two couples. He said "I will not treat him differently". He also asked me if I wanted to go with him and I told him "Yes". I was so happy to go, because I had never travelled before. When you are young and you are about to take a trip, you get so excited that you can't even sleep the night before.

My new father's family came to meet us, his mother, brothers and sisters asked him who I was and he told them: "This boy is my son, he has been given to me". People did not believe it, but the family and close friends gave me a warm welcome. The next day they took me to the town and bought me clothing and shoes. On the third day I went to school, but the teacher refused to accept me as a student due to my young age; I was really ten years old but they thought I was much younger. However, I was allowed to go to school, but as a listener, and at the end of the year, the teacher saw how smart I was and ended up accepting my registration. They even gave me my certificate. I kept on studying for six years in school.

I needed a birth certificate in order to get my school diploma. So my father went to the national citizens' registration; he was well known anywhere he went, he was recognised as a good element in the community. He talked to the employees and finally they gave me my birth certificate and therefore my diploma. I have it framed in Honduras, in the house where my father lives.

At first I thought: "I am not from around here, I have no family here", but it was just me because my family and friends treated me and loved me as if I was one of their own. Sometimes they asked me if my real parents were still alive and I wondered: "If my mother is still alive, she might be thinking of me". My parents always asked me about my past and I used to tell them the little things I remembered. And then they'd cheer me up by saying "You are not lost any more, because you are with us; and some day you will get to meet your real family". They lifted my spirits and gave me hope.

My father asked me if I wanted to keep on studying and I answered "yes"' He saw that I was an outstanding student. The teacher even gave me a present for my grades. I received a different kind of diploma owing to my good grades. My father bought me the school uniform, school materials and everything else; one of his friends registered me and this is how I began my high school studies. I was in school for about six months, but the family economy was not going well and they were unable to keep me studying. I told my father "Then I will work with the rest of you". We used to grow corn, beans, watermelons, radishes, carrots, cucumbers, cabbage, tomatoes, green pepper and even onions. I worked side by side with him for a long time. He worked the land, he was a farmer as any other; he was poor but a very good person. I was crushed when he died; he was a real father to me.

But before my father died, there was a friend who talked me into enlisting in the army. Around the year 1990 I was a good athlete and I played a lot of football. We were playing in a youth tournament. The coach promised us a field trip for the entire team if we won the tournament. We would go swimming and there would be food. We played our best for almost six months and we won the first place. My idea was to leave after the field trip, but I hadn't told my father.

I wanted to work in something else beside the land but I was afraid to tell him; I really respected my father, he loved me so much and I had never received punishment from him. If he corrected me, he wouldn't shout. Whenever he had something to say, he would tell me: "Son, go get a chair and sit right here". We would sit down face to face and he started telling me what bothered him. It was more like a friendly conversation; he was very patient and educated, and I never had hard feelings towards him. But still I was afraid to tell him I wanted to leave and I told my team mates: "I hope you guys enjoy the field trip, I will be leaving now with two of my friends". They all recommended me not to go; I had a girlfriend and told her my plans; later that afternoon, when we saw each other again, she gave me a letter with a poem and also a picture of her. I put them in my wallet.

We left on Sunday, just a friend of mine and me. We got to a place near the border and tried to enlist ourselves. Our surprise was that the battalion was having a party. It was the third of October, Soldier's Day in Honduras. We presented ourselves but my friend wasn't accepted. So we both travelled back home. When I arrived at my father's house, he had been looking for me. He asked: "Do you see now how it is?" and I told him: "Yes, father, I know how it is; I'll work with you and I will not leave this place again". My father was very happy I was back and my mother was crying. The truth is they loved me as their real son.

I found out about PRO-BUSQUEDA through my father's cousin, the lady who first opened the door to her house for me. She said "If your family is still alive, I want you to meet them". She begged me to write a letter telling all that I remembered and so I did; I wrote down my parent's and brothers' and sisters' names and I also included a photograph. My father said: "If you find your mother I will not stop you, it will be your decision". Two months later I received a letter from PRO-BUSQUEDA, telling me to be prepared, because they would come to get me and take me to El Salvador soon. I was always looking forward to this moment. Another two months later I went home for lunch, I was eating together with my wife (I had been married for 4 months) when suddenly I heard a car parking near my house. They asked: "Does Esteban G live in this house?". When I saw the car, I said to my wife: "It is they who came to see me". They showed me a picture: it was my mother and Germán, one of my brothers. "He looks like me", I told them. "He is your brother and she is your mother", they replied. I did not believe them at first. My mother was still so young and I had always pictured her much older. We talked a lot. That same day I travelled with them back to El Salvador. My wife and my father came with me.

When we got there, my other brother Ricardo was already waiting for me. My mother's family and friends were all there too; lots of people were expecting my arrival. It was a very happy occasion but at the same time I felt a little sad too. I

got out of the car, my brother hugged me and started crying; the tears would just keep flowing. This is something that I cannot explain. I asked my mother: "Are you my mother? He is my father from Honduras" I said and I pointed at him. Everybody hugged me and I was introduced to the entire family. We talked and talked until we stopped feeling awkward. Then I felt free and started talking openly and full of confidence. Afterwards I also met my biological father. You see, my mom and dad are no longer together.

I did not know what to decide; whether to move to El Salvador and live with my mother or whether to live in Honduras. We stayed in El Salvador for a few days and then my mother decided to take the trip to Honduras with me. My older brother Germán also went. On our way to Honduras, my mother asked me: "How in the world did you get as far as here?". "My father brought me here and raised me" I replied. When we got to our village, my mother from Honduras hugged me and started to cry. She had thought I was going to stay in El Salvador and never coming back. I told her: "Don't cry, I am here again. I'd like you to meet my mother and my brother. They will stay here with me for a couple of days". We all hugged each other, my mother, my brother, everybody. This is how my two families met each other. Now I divide my time between Honduras and El Salvador. I can call my parents in El Salvador "mother" and "father" and also those in Honduras; this makes me very happy.

3. Ana Lilian

I remember my mom carrying me and rocking me slowly in a hammock, but I can't remember her face. My father went out a lot; when I woke up in the morning he wasn't there. I lived in my older brother's place, the one who was a guerrilla fighter just like my father. I do remember his face, the way he looked and I remember my three brothers. Two of them are older than me. I am the middle child, and Carlos is the youngest of us all. There is a big age difference between us. One morning, men in green knocked on our door and asked for my father: "Where can we find him?" My mother told them where they could find him and they warned us: "It had better be true, or else we will come back and kill you all". After they left, my mother told another man who was staying with us that she had not told them the truth. "I hope they will not come back again", my mother said but they did and this time only two men were at our door. We were hiding inside our house. They started banging on the door and screamed they would force the door if we did not open up.

Finally my mother opened the door with Carlos in her arms. They pushed her. There was a ditch at one side of the house like the type where people would dump garbage; it was deep. They were pushing my mother towards the ditch at the same time they shouted at her: "We warned you if we did not find your husband it was you who was going to pay the consequences". She begged them not to kill her; she had small children to look after. But they did not care about that. I remember it well; they shot my mother and she fell on the ground. The men ordered me to get the little boy away from her. I was five years old and could not carry him, but I dragged him inside. They just killed my mother and left.

An hour later my father came with a blanket and placed it on top of my mother's dead body. She was buried in a placed near our house. I remember it well; a few men dug a hole and then she was all covered. My father had nowhere to take us and he took Carlos and me to a neighbour's house and said he was coming to pick us up in two days. But he never came. The lady told us she could no longer have us there, because she could not give us the food she needed to give to her children. So we stayed there for three days and then a car from the Red Cross came to pick us up. We arrived at the Red Cross building and saw a bunch of people working there. We just stayed there for one night. The next day a woman, the one who is now my (adoptive) aunt, came and asked us if we wanted to go with her. I can't remember what my answer was, but she took us with her to her home.

They filled us with attention: they bought us all sort of things; they changed our clothes; they took us shopping and bought us lots of toys; they made special things for us. It helped us to forget what we had been through. I used to be together with Carlos all the time until one of my (adoptive) uncles (the brother of the woman that picked them up at the Red Cross) came and took him away. I started crying but they told me that he was going to be with my uncle and I could go there and play with him and my cousins every day if I wanted to. I liked to hang out with my cousins; I went there almost every day. Maybe they also took me there to get me used to the idea of Carlos living separately from me.

I came here in November and in January I was starting school. I was going to be six years old. They were able to find my original birth certificate, so they knew my real name and age. In school at first I went as a listener and afterwards the teacher said: "You are smart and you are ready now". One day, my (adoptive) mother approached me and told me I had to make a choice. My (adoptive) grandmother asked me: "Look, here are the two women you know (of this family); now which one do you want to be your mother? Do you want it to be the one who brought you here or the other one?" I looked at both women and I said: "The other one". "Why?" she asked me. "She has something that looks like my (birth) mother". "What?" she asked. "The hair", I said.

There was a time when I did not want to remember what I had been through. Two years after my arrival my (adoptive) mother approached me and asked if I remembered something from my past. I replied: "Like what kind of things?": "Like if you had another family before, and if you saw someone get killed". I replied: "I don't want to talk about it and I hate it that other people know what I have been through". I even said Carlos was my cousin, knowing he was my brother. I used to tell Carlos that he was my cousin but one time I told him that he was not my uncle's son. He started crying and asked me why people were saying that I was his sister and I told him it was all true. "How come we are brother and sister?" he questioned me. "Because we come from the same parents" I answered back. "But why are we not with them?" he asked again. "I have no idea where they are" I answered. He kept on asking me the same questions over and over, until one day I told him the truth. I told him: "They did not want to give us up or abandon us, but things happened and we ended up here".

I was still afraid; for example, when we used to take the bus and it was stopped

by soldiers. It would scare me to see the soldiers searching the bus. When they were on the bus, I was scared to the point of wanting to run off the bus. All I could see in my mind was the day they killed my mother. It was a sensation of terror I could not get rid of. I also remember when they'd burn tyres in the street. That scared me too.

One night, my uncle came to our house crying. Some people from PRO-BUSQUEDA had visited his house and they had asked about two kids who had disappeared a long time ago. He told us everything; he was crying because he thought they were going to take his son away from him. I could not believe I would ever find my father and brothers again; I never thought they were still alive! People from PRO-BUSQUEDA came to my house on the next day and they started asking me questions; I could not keep on lying and decided to tell the truth. They asked me if I wanted to meet my father and my brothers and I told them "Yes". Still I had never told my (adoptive) family what had really happened. It wasn't until after PRO-BUSQUEDA found me and talked to me, that I sat down with my mother and I decided to tell her the whole truth.

I was happy but at the same time I was nervous about seeing them again. I felt a little bit of rejection to them. I could not understand why they showed up only now that I was a grown-up. "Why does my father want to see us again? Why did he not take care of us before?" But I still felt curiosity and wanted to meet them.

They took us to a house where all of the (birth) family was expecting us: aunts, uncles, my grandfather, every one was so happy. My grandmother on my mother's side of the family hugged me and said: "How beautiful you are; you are just like my daughter". She also said that my mother's skin was white, that she had long curly hair and asked me if I still remembered her. I remember her general appearance but not her face. I always wanted to see her face, even if it were only in my dreams. Since I was little I wanted this, but I came to the conclusion that I was really not able to remember her. One person who was also happy to see us was the woman we stayed with before the Red Cross came. She was the first person who started crying and asked for our forgiveness; she had to give us away because she had no possibilities of taking good care of us and if it was up to her she would have done it gladly, but she just could not do it. She gave us a big hug.

When I hugged my father he also asked for our forgiveness and he said he was the one to blame. I felt bad because I also thought he was guilty for what had happened, and now he was telling me he was. I have visited him a couple of times and he always asks for our forgiveness. I tell him I've nothing to say to him; it was destiny that wanted this to happen. This is why I do not like to visit him, because he always tells us that he feels he abandoned us and I don't like to feel that way. I said: "Whatever happened is now in the past. Thank God we did not bounce around from place to place and that we found a family who really loved us".

I used to have a very nice relationship with my parents. Everywhere my father went I went with him, he gave me a little horse and a small machete. My mother was a sweetheart. War is what I mostly remember of Chalatenango. I was 5 years old, one day my parents were busy because there was a cow being slaughtered to feed everyone. All of a sudden a gunshot was heard. Someone yelled: “The soldiers are here” and we were not able to take anything with us. The soldiers were burning houses and killing everyone in their way. My parents grabbed us, three children in all. We abandoned our house barefooted and started running away from the soldiers. We slept in a coffee plantation with no mattress to sleep on, no blankets for the cold. We suffered harsh rainstorms without being able to protect ourselves. My grandmother had brought some tortillas to eat but after a while the tortillas were getting stiff and rotten; we could only eat half a tortilla a day and also ate a kind of grass, very sour, which comes with a small yellow flower.

In one of those runs, fleeing from the army, my father and brother disappeared. My mother, sister and I were the only ones left. I ask my mother “Where is my father?” She answered that they have taken the lost path, those words were used when a person was murdered. Afterwards I found out that my father was supposedly a guerrilla combatant. For a long time we lived in an underground shelter. During a military operative a small baby who was hidden with us started crying and the soldier heard his cry and found us there. They screamed: “Come out from there, or we will start shooting”. Some people were able to escape, but we were captured and forced to walk barefooted while they were beating us with their rifles and yelling “You are guerrillas, you sons of a bitch, you are all going to die”.

They took us all to an open field, where we stayed for a few days. They said that all children were going to be moved somewhere else and later on the mothers were going to join their children. So they took us away just like taking a puppy away from its mother, and they put us, me and my sister and the other children in a helicopter and flew us out.

After, the Red Cross took us to an orphanage that was more like a barn; we were all angry at them (the people taking care of us). I took off my shirt and madly mopped the floor with it (a manifestation of anger) while I was screaming “I want my mother”. About 300 children were living in the orphanage. Five days after our arrival a group was organised and transferred to the Villas Infantiles orphanage. My sister and I were separated; she was taken somewhere else. Villas Infantiles had very strict rules. If I sang a song from the guerrilla, I was painfully punished for singing. It did not matter if I did not understand their lyrics, they were just songs to me. They used to treat us like animals; they even whipped us with a wire. The director of Villas Infantiles was almost never there and when we complained he would never believe what the children had to say. From 8 to 11 o’clock in the morning we had to work the land. Hard labour, until our hands were blistered and bleeding. I felt we weren’t orphans but rather slaves. The whole purpose was not to spend the money given by the government for our nourishment, so that the director could stuff it in his pocket.

I used to blame God for what had happened to me and thought "Maybe God doesn't love me but he did nothing to stop my father from disappearing, he did nothing to bring me back my mother, he didn't stop them from taking away my little sister. That is the reason why I am alone". I remember they used to take me to therapy and they used to tell me to forget my past and I used to say to them "Maybe years have passed but I still remember like it was yesterday when my parents disappeared. I will grow up and I will always carry my past deep in my heart".

One day a friend and I escaped from the daily work duty. Afraid of what they might do to us, we decided not to sleep there. During that day we had nothing to eat. The next day they found us and we both received an awful beating as punishment. I will never forget it. In front of all the girls, they forced us to wear only underwear; they took a thick wet rope and whipped us; that was the harshest beating I ever received in my whole life.

Our health care and meals were all right, but food just fed our stomachs and not our souls and hearts. I always felt lonesome, I never got used to calling the person who cared for us "mother", my heart was full of hatred. The people who took care of us used to tell me to talk to them whenever I had problems and to see them as friends but I never did trust them with my problems. We found comfort among ourselves; the people responsible for us, instead of helping us close our wounds, they made a bigger and deeper hole in our hearts.

I always stayed in school for a while longer than I was supposed to. I told my teacher "School is my first house, the other is the second one". That was until I got involved with the gangs and everything fell down. I was twelve years old when I started to hang out with "18" gang[101], I used to escape at night. Once I was stabbed by a member from another gang and at the Villas Infantiles they beat me as a punishment. Then I was sent to Pascual 's restaurant to work there. The owner at first treated me quite well, almost like a son, but I met a boy who taught me to drink liquor and beer and I became a heavy drinker. I did not want to work any more, we used to sniff cocaine. I began to become desperate again and I felt that there was no way out of my life; everything lost its meaning; I tried rat poison twice but I was quickly taken to the hospital so I survived both times. I was in prison no less than 27 times.

When my (biological) family found me, I could not believe it and it was hard for me to trust them. I had no idea of the existence of PRO-BUSQUEDA. I used to say: "How can it be possible? If my family is still alive, they would have found me when I was a child. There is no reason for it now; I am a grown man, I can live on my own, even if it is only being a thief for a living. What do I need a family for?" I did not want to go to Chalatenango to meet them.

So at first it was hard to get along with them, but now we are much better. One step at a time I am learning to love them, to talk to them; lately I even miss being with them. I did not find my mother and father; only my brother, aunts and uncles and grandparents. My relatives explained to me that, after taking us away by helicopter, the soldiers started to kill all the women, but my mother was able to escape. Unfortunately, while she was running they shot her in the leg; she

101 "18" is one of the largest gangs in El Salvador.

was not able to get medical attention and died from an infection, afterwards. My father was killed also.

During my time in Villas Infantiles, I came to have three names; my family helped me get my real birth certificate and now I have my own true identity. That helps a lot, I feel more secure with who I am. This is why I feel grateful for God and PRO-BUSQUEDA, because this is a dream come true. My real name is J Vitelio N A and now I know that my parents died but their spirits will always be in my heart. It is up to me to honour their names and be a better person; and, most importantly, I have to keep God with me because with faith everything is possible. I now belong to Men in Prayer Rehabilitation Ministry and being there has helped me a great deal. It was difficult to be myself. With this help I was finally able to get rid of my addiction. God has helped me; He was the only one who could get me out of my addictions. Also I have a job, again working in a restaurant.

My first main objective was to become clean and independent, and I am doing well. My other objectives are: to find my sister who is still missing and to raise a family of my own. I'd love to have children and give them the kind of love I didn't have. But the lack of love I experienced didn't happen because my parents wanted to leave me: the war is the main cause of our separation. I do not want my children to suffer what I have suffered, because it is very hard; that is why I want to be a good father.