

PROLOGUE

DR. JOEL FILÁRTIGA AND I met through our mutual friend Roberto Thompson, then the editor of *ABC Color*, Paraguay's largest newspaper. Roberto had agreed to publish an article of mine about the Jesuit Missions of Paraguay, in four consecutive Sunday Supplements. After reading the first installment, Filártiga stopped by the office in Asunción to check out the rest of the essay. And, in a burst of generosity and creativity, on the spot he drew pen-and-ink drawings for the remaining three episodes.

But it was not until two years later that I first met Filártiga, when in 1975 I returned to Paraguay to continue my dissertation research on Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, the controversial George Washington figure of Paraguayan independence. Through our long discussions of world events and Paraguayan politics and history, Joel and I discovered a shared philosophy of life and grew to become close friends. He drew illustrations for each chapter of my book, graphically capturing their central themes. At his rural clinic in Ybycuí, I came to admire his philanthropic work with the peasants. There I grew to love the whole Filártiga family, and I developed an independent friendship with Joelito, Joel's sixteen-year-old son.

During this time, we set into motion plans for Filártiga to come to UCLA to display his art and draw attention to conditions in Paraguay. Joel's January 1976 trip was a great success, his speeches and exhibitions expanding to other institutions throughout southern California.

Just six weeks after Filártiga's return to Paraguay, Joelito was tortured to death by the police of General Alfredo Stroessner. By then, I had received my Ph.D. in Latin American history from UCLA and was preparing to return to Paraguay as an Organization of American States postdoctoral fellow to conduct further historical research.

At the behest of my friends, I arrived in Paraguay to live in the Filártigas' home. For the next seven months, I shared their terror, agonies, and degradation. As a trained historian, I happened to be on the scene before, during, and after what turned out to be a historical event. As Dr. Filártiga years later ironically observed: "It was almost as if you won the lottery—backwards." It is only because of these improbable circumstances that it has been possible to write *Breaking Silence* from the vantage point of a participant-observer.

Following Joelito's murder, the Filártigas did not buckle under to the fear and misdirected shame that is characteristic of human rights victims, not unlike those of child sexual abuse and domestic violence. Contrary to the reasonable expectations of the

dictatorship, they refused to go along with the official cover-up and discreetly bury Joelito. Instead, breaking the silence of human rights victims, the Filártigas did everything in their power to reveal the truth.

Upon arriving in Paraguay in 1976, I joined the Filártigas in their cause, tapping into the network of media, political, and other influential people I had built as a graduate student researching my doctoral dissertation in Paraguay. My semiofficial status at the U.S. Embassy as a Fulbright-Hays scholar had accorded me wide-ranging access, both within the American community as well as among Paraguayan intellectuals and politicians.

Also, my historical work on Dr. Francia attracted quite a bit of attention. The Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia gave me the honor of becoming its only non-Paraguayan member. Even before I had completed the final version of *Paraguay's Autonomous Revolution: 1810–1840*, it had been translated and published in three lengthy installments in *Estudios Paraguayos*, the academic journal of the Catholic University. Its first Spanish edition came out a few months later.

Because of this, I was regularly invited to give newspaper interviews and lectures on Paraguayan history. The public exposure created the opportunity to form personal relationships with a number of influential people, some of whom later greatly contributed to the Filártigas' struggle; from Congressman Domingo Laino, the leader of Paraguay's principal opposition political party, to Colonel Robert LaSala, the disillusioned Green Beret Vietnam veteran serving as a U.S. military adviser to the Paraguayan Army.

As I helped investigate the murky circumstances of Joelito's death, I began collecting primary and secondary source materials on the *Caso Filártiga*, an undertaking I continued after returning to the United States, throughout the following years of organizing, and again later during the late 1980s and 1990s as I conducted the research for *Breaking Silence*.

Over these years, I maintained contact with the Filártigas, and worked with human rights activists and nongovernmental organizations supporting the family's pursuit of justice in Paraguay and the United States. Along the way, I conducted scores of interviews and follow-ups with the principals, amounting to well over 100 hours of taped recordings. All were transcribed, and when necessary translated into English. This material was then catalogued according to subject matter and transferred onto computerized note cards. Finally, the information was printed onto thousands of cross-referenced note cards.

Other kinds of primary source information that were integrated into this database include private correspondence, diaries, journals, and contemporary chronicles of events, both written and tape recorded; documentation from various human rights, legal advocacy, and Latin American support organizations; internal documents from the files of the Anti-Smuggling Unit of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS); previously classified U.S. Department of State cables, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act; letters of support and inquiry from members of the U.S. Congress to the government of Paraguay, the INS, the Department of State, and the U.S. Embassy and consulate in Paraguay; as well as official court documents and trial transcripts from the legal proceedings in both Paraguay and the United States. The *Breaking Silence*

research archive amounts to some 12,000 pages of documentation, from which 87 Thematic Chronologies were compiled and, in turn, distilled into a 178-page Master Chronology. This archive will become publicly accessible in a university law library or other appropriate institution, as well as in the Paraguayan Archivos de Horror, as the formerly secret records of General Stroessner's police state have come to be known.

In citations from secondary sources—such as newspaper and magazine articles—I have used exact quotations for all references. In writing the dialogue, I have employed primary sources, relying upon the recorded interviews or contemporary records of at least one of the participants, and as often as possible using their exact words. As a further check for accuracy, in the great majority of cases, it has been possible for the people involved to review the dialogues in which they appear. Because a tape recorder was not running at all times, the dialogues are necessarily neither literal nor precise verbatim exchanges but rather substantively reliable reconstructions.

In a few cases, I have disguised the identities of people who—even today—could be harmed should their participation become known, by changing names and other identifying facts; to this end, in one instance I melded two people into a composite character.

By the methodological standard of the professional historian, *Breaking Silence* is an unusual documentary presentation. I feel secure characterizing it as a work of dramatic nonfiction.

The personal, moral, political, and legal significance of *Breaking Silence* should be gauged from the point of view of the Filártiga family's tragedy, as it grew from yet another routine torture-murder by a tinhorn dictator in the middle of South America to acquire the status of a landmark U.S. legal precedent with increasing international significance, and from which hundreds of torture survivors have benefited. The overall historical integrity of this saga should be judged from the perspective of a painstakingly documented account of that family's defiance of oppression, resulting in what Dr. Filártiga calls "a touch of justice."